

John Chaplin

by Sieg Lindstrom

Irascible John Chaplin is the U.S. Men's Olympic Coach. The former longtime Washington State coach guided many Olympic-medal and World Record-setting athletes, including legendary Kenyan distance runner Henry Rono.

An instrumental figure in the running of the '88, '92 and '96 Olympic Trials as chair of USATF's International Competition Committee, for the 2000 Games Chaplin has dusted off his coach's cap. As you'll see from the following dialogue, the 62-year-old Chaplin believes in speaking his mind, and in wasting no words in so doing.

T&FN: With the Olympics still ahead, what are the most pressing issues for you as an Olympic coach?

Chaplin: Getting them there. Because this is not like 1948 when we put all the athletes on the boat, and we all waved good-bye at the harbor, they all went together, and they arrived in England, and then they had their meet, and they came home, and we threw some confetti, and they went back to their lives.

Today many of these athletes are professionals; they make their living at this. After the Trials many of them went to Europe. Some will do well and some of them have expectations that probably aren't realistic, but they're spread out all over the world.

So we'll take a batch on the 19th of August with some staff; we'll send some staff to Europe for the relay. And we will send another batch the first couple days of September, and then everybody has to be in the country no later than the 12th.

Also, we have those who have not filled all their paperwork out because they either had something else to do, or they felt they were too important to fill out their paperwork, or their agents decided that they wanted to fight the USOC over certain clauses in their paperwork. But that will all come to a halt on a certain day because there will come a day that's out of my hands—above my pay-grade—when they will simply not be entered if they don't do the paperwork. So they'll end up doing it.

T&FN: What clauses in the paperwork bother athletes?

Chaplin: They seem to have problems with the paperwork about restrictions with pictures and things. Maybe this should be looked at because maybe the Olympic Games are not the amateur thing they once were.

Ninety-nine percent of the athletes understand that we're only there to facilitate and help them with their coaches. Of course, when they want passes for their coaches, then they want us to jump through the hoops immediately, but when we want to take a picture so we

can get them the USOC stuff, some of them don't want to do that. So it tends to be a constant irritation on both sides. It's happened for years; it's nothing brand new.

T&FN: How will you manage selection of the relay teams and their practice before the Games?

Chaplin: We have to find a place where we can run some relay trials. At the same time, they're trying to make money and we're trying to get a relay team put together. These are not things that really necessarily run in tandem together.

T&FN: You're talking about relay trials in Europe?

Chaplin: Yeah, well, somewhere. We'll probably run on September 1st in Berlin with the men, and the women will run a couple of other meets. Once again, it's just logistics. We understand they're trying to make a living.

We also understand that sometimes in life you have to make choices. If you want all the plums on the tree and you get a little greedy, you might find out that you don't get the best plum, but that is life and some people have to learn that the hard way.

The majority of the athletes who earn medals have a tendency to understand that the medal may mean, bluntly, more money to them.

T&FN: What are your thoughts on the loss of a Jeff Hartwig or a Matt Hemingway to the U.S. team through our Trials selection method?

Chaplin: We go through this every time. You can either let them select themselves or you can play God. Well, I don't want to play God, regardless of whether some reporters think I act like it. I think if you're going to let the athletes select themselves on any one given date, inherently you're

A no-holds-barred conversation with the outspoken U.S. men's Olympic coach

going to lose a few. My answer is still, given our system and our set of values, let them do it themselves; don't let someone play God.

T&FN: In light of the way politics over the makeup of relay teams has blown up in the faces of some recent Olympic coaches, some U.S. fans hope you will play God in picking the relay teams.

Chaplin: It's not so much [playing] God as

KEVIN MORRIS



Chaplin says, "I don't want to play God, regardless of whether some reporters think I act like it."

that the point is we're going to decide, and we're going to run four people unless someone goes down. Everybody's been told all this.

T&FN: How strong is this Olympic team?

Chaplin: In the 100, 200, 400, both hurdles, shot put, discus, high jump, I think in all of those you've got to say that we're right there at the top of world level.

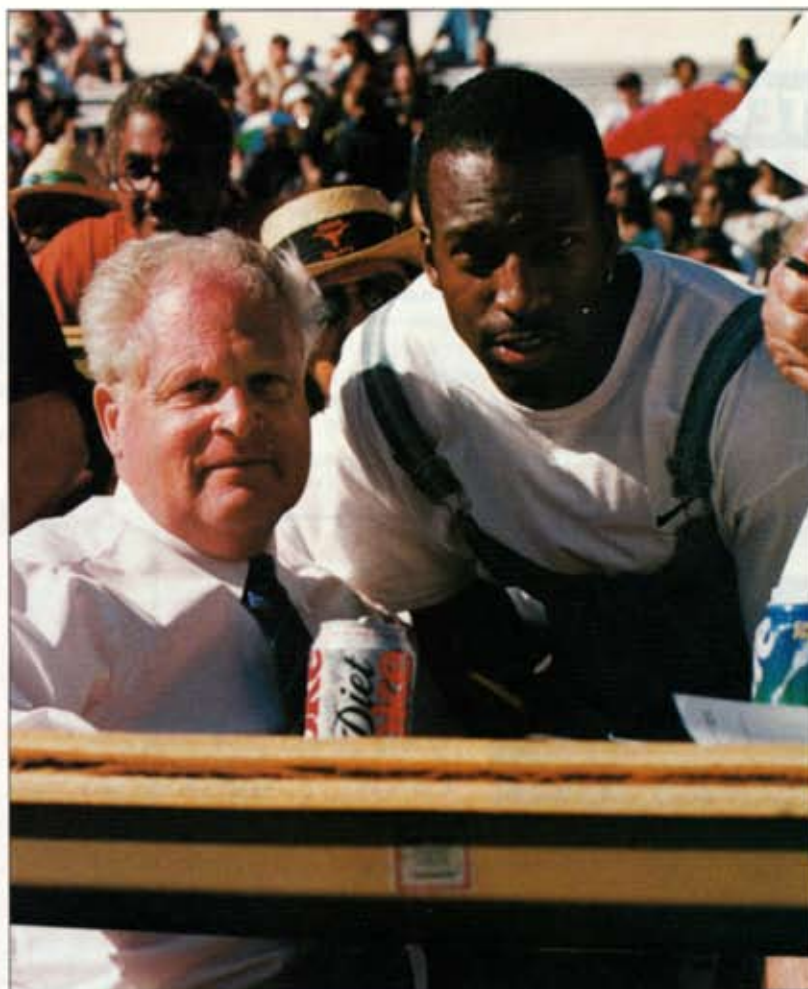
Who knows what we'll do in the walks and the distances. We have capable young men, but it's unrealistic to think that any of them, unless they make a drastic improvement, is going to win a gold medal.

On the other hand after I've said that, I remember Billy Mills beating Ron Clarke [in the '64 OG 10,000]. The point is anything can happen, so before one jumps out the window and says we have no chance, one ought to check history.

T&FN: U.S. high, long and triple jumping seem to have slipped some since Atlanta. What do you make of that?

Chaplin: Well, a year ago I was ready to hang myself. But I think Austin looks all right. I think the jumpers we have in both the long and triple, these are people capable of jumping 28-feet or 57, 58. If you can do that...

Remember this is not going to be warm weather. This might even be an advantage for the Americans because 99% of them went to college and went through a collegiate and a



Chaplin puts a positive spin on the fact that Olympic legend Michael Johnson won't be doubling in the 200 and 400 in Sydney.

high school system where they started in early March running. They have run in the rain and they didn't wait until the summer when it's nice weather to start running track.

T&FN: You opposed the decision to run fewer qualifying rounds in the Olympic Trials this year. Why?

Chaplin: Anyone who watched the Trials understood that two rounds in the 1500m was

has to do with what happened.

Now for the next four years you only had one marathon runner in the Olympic Games for 2000 from the United States, and that probably isn't the best way to promote the marathon. Or maybe I've just lived out in the wheat fields by myself too long.

T&FN: How will you gauge your own success as an Olympic coach?

Chaplin: I say half facetiously—but with some truth in it—if they don't drop the stick in the short relay and they win that one, I'll probably escape this thing with my eyes still intact.

T&FN: Will you sit the team down to discuss goals, as you once might have as a college coach?

Chaplin: No, no, no. We're talking about professionals. They know what they've got to do. The answer is to make the environment as conducive as possible, try to keep any problems away from them, help them with whatever they need, facilitate with their coaches, then go have a Diet Coke in the stands and hope the great track man in the sky likes you when it's all over and you do well.

You need a lot of luck to go with a lot of skill. □

Sacramento 200 Revisited

T&FN: What was your reaction to the Greene-Johnson rivalry in the Trials 200 and the outcome in which both pulled up injured?

Chaplin: First of all, I like both Maurice Greene and Michael Johnson, and I particularly didn't want to be in the middle of that conflict if possible because there was no way to win it; you can't take sides.

For me, selfishly, it was a wonderful thing that happened because I don't have to worry about it. I still have three good young men, and probably at that moment in time Capel was the best 200m runner in the world.

So we're probably no worse off than we would have been the other way because we have three that will be fresh versus two that would have had to double.

As good as you are, doubling is a hard thing to

do, and it's getting harder and harder in the Olympic Games just because of the level of competition.

T&FN: Any thoughts on Johnson having said afterwards—and this may well have applied to Greene as well—that despite feeling cramps before the race he felt obligated to run the Trials 200 final to avoid a firestorm of criticism in the press?

Chaplin: That's the problem. Sometimes you can get yourself in a situation by what you say. In both cases, I think both young men got themselves pushed into a situation that you couldn't quit when you know you should.

Miraculously, no one got hurt seriously, and we got out unscathed. As the coach, I'm tickled to death that I've got the World Record holder in the 100 and the World Record holder in the 400, and I think I have some young 200m runners that can carry the load, and this probably gives us a little more help in the relay in the sense that they're a little less tired and they have fewer events.