

Johnny Gray has finished feeding his 10-day-old second son, Jared. Outside his Los Angeles apartment, a warm sun has perked the temperature into the 80s. After this interview, he's planning to take a short drive in his brand-new jeep.

In a small town, a trip on the streets would most likely yield numerous hands waving at him, mouths yelling, "Hi Johnny" and eyes looking in wonder. But in LA he'll probably be able to count those occurrences on one hand's fingers.

Johnny loves the spotlight, but he doesn't mind when "fame" isn't in close attendance. "Living where I live, so close to Hollywood, there's so much that people have and see out here that an American Record holder at 800m doesn't excite them that much."

To the track world, however, Johnny Gray is very exciting. He has broken or tied the 800m AR more times—5—than anyone else this century. His fifth-fastest time is still faster than any other American has ever run.

He never thought he'd get anywhere near as fast—1:42.60—as he is now. Back in 1978, he says, he never thought he'd break 1:50. His teammate at Crenshaw High was Jeff West, a High School Record setter-to-be. Every day of school, the two would meet at Winchell's and walk to school together.

At a nearby high school David Mack was whizzing around ovals on his way to winning two California State 880 crowns. Gray, a year older than those two, had only one year of running under his belt. But in late May of '78 he scored a shocking upset by beating Mack and West for the LA City title.

He was on his way. With the exception of a hernia in 1981, he has been relatively injury free during his impressive progression. A graceful runner, he is also a thoughtful friend and foe. "I consider myself fortunate," he explains, "so I like to teach people and share things with people, even my competitors."

He happily reflected on his career as he prepared for the upcoming World Cup:

T&FN: *I understand that you paid the way for your coach, Merle McGee, and his wife to go over to Europe for the second half of the season so they could watch you.*

Gray: *You know, that's really not enough, though. Because if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be where I am in track & field. I mean, he's dedicated a lot of his time to me. And I feel I owe him something—I know he doesn't feel that way, but I do.*

He went with me the first half and without his wife it's a little rough. You know, you don't want to sit in a hotel room all day, and you don't want to go sightsee by yourself. It's a little nicer when

JOHNNY GRAY



Theo van de Rakt

you're over there with someone. The trip goes quicker; otherwise, it takes forever.

T&FN: *Why did you ever start running the 800? Did you have a hero you looked up to?*

Gray: You know, I had a hero in track, but I never really took time to become that deeply involved in the track world. You know, I didn't look at the history or learn the names and times. But I knew this one guy by a hat he wore.

I never knew what his event was—this is before I started running track—I didn't even know his name. Maybe I heard it, but I forgot it. I don't know. But I remember he had this hat and we always used to watch him run. He'd always sit back and the next thing we knew he'd kick, and he had a tough kick. And then come to find out that in the future I'm running track and I'm an 800m man. Then I found out that man—Dave Wottle—was an 800m man.

T&FN: *Strange the way things work out sometimes, isn't it?*

Gray: It's weird. Because every race I would watch was always an 800. I can remember another race I watched when I saw Juantorena and Mike Boit run. And it was on the *Sports Illustrated* cover, because I can remember distinctly getting that *Sports Illustrated* and saying, "Hey, this is the race that I saw." And that was an 800. The only things I can remember about track & field were 800m races.

T&FN: *So when you started track did you start in the 800?*

Gray: Well, when I started I was in the 2M. It was fun at the beginning, then it started becoming long to me. So one day the coach was having a time trial for the half, and my older brother, Byron, beat me, 2:16 to 2:17. I liked the race because it was exciting—tough competition the first half and then you kick. I wanted to improve myself and before I knew it I was an 800 man.

T&FN: *At TAC, you saw Earl Jones tear off from the start and run a 48.4 first lap. What did you think?*

Gray: Well, I knew the pace was fast because I know my body and I know pace. I was saying to myself that all I had to do was keep contact. But I couldn't get on his shoulder because in order to do that I would have to run out of my range, and that's one thing I didn't want to do so early in the race.

It was a gutsy try, and the more he does it, one day he's going to finish it. That was a great try. He took 3rd, but he still ran 1:44.58. I respect Earl with all, *all* honor. I used to run like that when a 50 first lap was hot.

T&FN: *Do you ever see yourself ripping off a first 400 as fast as Earl did at TAC?*

Gray: Oh yeah, I can do it. One day I'll give it a try. But in the shoes I'm in now I'm trying to make a name and establish

the name Johnny Gray in the world of track & field. Right now I want to continue to be consistent, and once I'm consistent for quite a while and on top, I can experiment.

T&FN: *How fast do you see yourself opening up an 800 in the future?*

Gray: I feel I can go as fast as 47.8 on the first lap and feel comfortable.

T&FN: *How fast do you think you can become in the 800?*

Gray: Ooh, I hate to predict stuff like that. But I feel I'm capable of going beyond the World Record, for sure.

T&FN: *Someone will break the 1:40 barrier.*

Gray: I hope to be the first.

T&FN: *Who do you think will do it when will it happen?*

Gray: OK, I have a few athletes in mind who I think are capable of doing it. Me, for instance. I feel I'm capable of breaking the 1:40 barrier. Joaquim Cruz definitely is capable of it. Earl Jones is definitely capable if he can keep his head right. See, he's got the potential, but he's not as consistent as I thought he could have been. If he can stay in track & field and keep his hunger, I feel Earl can break the 1:40 barrier.

T&FN: *You've been in nearly every sub-1:44 race over the last two years. Do you think times will continue to be hot in the 800, perhaps get even hotter? Or do you foresee things tapering off a bit in the very near future?*

Gray: What's going to happen, I feel, is it's going to taper down a bit, but it's going to taper down to where you're seeing consistently more 1:43s. And then you're going to see one or two athletes pop into the 1:40s.

Remember Coe back in 1981? It was tapering down into the 1:44 area and then Coe popped a 1:42. That's what's going to happen here: You're going to see people taper down to the 1:43 area and then one or two people are going to pop the 1:40. The World Record's going to be gone. Maybe someone will even break 1:40.

T&FN: *The development in just the last two years has been amazing, hasn't it?*

Gray: Hey, it's incredible. It's all mental though because no one will do it until someone else does it. Like the triple jump. Willie Banks jumped 58-11½ and the next thing you know, everybody's jumping 57-58 feet. It happens once you see someone close to you do it and you think, "I can do it."

People got used to Cruz, Sammy [Koskei] and me running in the 1:42-1:43 range last year. And they said, "Hey, we can do it too." And they started doing it. A 1:44 is nothing now over there.

To answer your question, I think it is going to taper down into the 1:43s. And I figure Cruz, Sammy Koskei, myself and

maybe Cram or Coe will go under 1:41.7. Coe may get close to his World Record again, but I don't think he'll go beyond it. But Cram definitely will. The reason that I pick those athletes is that we're more consistent. We've been in the 1:43s so many times, and I feel you have to become consistent at a certain time before you can—boom—run a real fast one.

T&FN: *You know, when you look back on the whole season—indoor World Record, a couple of fast relays at Sun Angel, you beat Cruz at Jenner, won TAC, then broke your American Record again—you really accomplished a lot. Which do you take the most pride in?*

Gray: I take the most pride in running within myself. I know what Johnny Gray can do, what I'm capable of doing. If I get out there and don't run to my capabilities, then I'm not going to be happy with myself. I don't psych myself up and I don't use any excuses because track & field is a sport with a thousand excuses.

I mean, no matter what, people will always say, "If *this* didn't happen" or "If *that* didn't happen. . ." I overheard Tony Rambo say, "If maybes and should've's were cherries and nuts we'd all have a merry Christmas." And it's true—you're going to have excuses all the time. But I block all that out—I figure I had all my chances to say "if," and "should've" and it doesn't work when I say it, so I'm not going to listen when another athlete says it.

T&FN: *Would you ever describe yourself as a bundle of energy just itching to be cut loose for an 800 race?*

Gray: Well, yes, I feel that tension in me a lot. For most of my big upcoming races, I say to myself, "I can't *wait* for this race." When I'm overseas, it's always like that. And once the race is over with, it's like, "Whew! It's over." When you're into track & field like that, that's when you know your mental state of track & field is together.

T&FN: *What does the release of all that tension feel like?*

Gray: Oh, man, you never could guess. It releases so much it's like you feel that the rest of your life is set. That's if you're doing well—everything in life is just right.

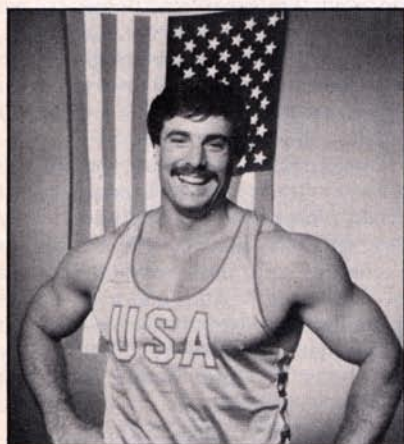
T&FN: *What do you think about during a race?*

Gray: It depends. If it's a meet like Pepsi, it's just wait for a kick. There's no certain strategy that you can set up for a race, because you never know how the race is going to really turn out. You're thinking how you've seen your competitors race, but they can change so much that you have to block that out.

You have to race within yourself. You have to put in your mind that "I'm going to run like this; I'm going to hold this pace; I'm going to make my move at this mark." If you find yourself in front, you've got to maintain. You have to be ready—there's

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GRAY INTERVIEW—continued:

so much. You have to be quick in thinking.

T&FN: *Is there a difference in tactics between races in Europe and the U.S.? Is there more contact in Europe?*

Gray: In Europe there's definitely more contact. In the U.S., a runner of my status doesn't have to worry as much because you find that the U.S. athletes are pretty much going to follow you anyway.

In the U.S. there's bumping on the first break, but then people will tend to back off and get into position. Overseas, there's no backing off—no one is going to give you position. You have to elbow or kick or push a little bit to get your position. And you're really not comfortable in your position until after the 500, and that's a long way to fight.

T&FN: *Do you have any hobbies?*

Gray: I like doing a lot of things. Like fishing. I'm an outdoors person. I have a little "country man" in me because my father is from Shreveport, Louisiana, and he's into all the ducks and rabbits. I don't have that here, because I can't really live that type of lifestyle. I like it, but I can't live it all the time. But I can take a two-week vacation. I like fishing. I could fish every day.

Last year, during the three-week break I take after each season, David Mack and I went fishing every day. We'd go down to Cabrillo Beach, off the rocks. There's this spot we got and we walk out there and kick back all day. We'd take off at like 5:00 in the morning and wouldn't get home until about midnight sometimes.

T&FN: *That sounds very relaxing.*

Gray: We have a good time. One time we walked out on the rocks and the tide was down. We crossed the rocks OK, but on the way back the tide had come up and the rocks were covered, so we had to swim across to get back to shore.

I don't really like cleaning and eating the fish, but I love catching them. Especially when a big one gives you a good fight. □

Johnny Lee Gray, Jr., was born in Los Angeles on June 19, 1960, and is 6-3 $\frac{3}{4}$ /167. Coached from the beginning by Merle McGee, his coach at Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles.

Altered the AR 4 times last year, once this year: 1:43.74 =AR; 1:43.28 AR; 1:43.28 =AR; 1:42.96 AR; 1:42.60 AR. His current AR is 4, 9 W; 1000 PR of 2:17.27 ('84) is 8, 9 A. His progression (with World and U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	Affiliation	800	Major Meets
1977	16/17	Crenshaw HS	2:06.0y	
1978	17/18	"	1:51.1	7)State HS
1979	18/19	SWLA CC	1:49.39	4)TAC Jr
1980	19/20	SMCC	1:47.06 (x,10)	8)OT
1981	20/21	SMTC	injured	
1982	21/22	"	1:45.41 (x, 3)	2)TAC
1983	22/23	"	1:45.50 (x, 7)	5s)TAC
1984	23/24	"	1:42.96 (5, 2)	2)OT 7)OG
1985	24/25	"	1:42.60	1)TAC