Her achievements during this winter’s indoor season have been the beautiful blossoming of the new Mary Decker.

World class at age 14 and a World Record setter by 15, Decker was touted as the sport’s next great 800 and 1500 star during the mid-’70s. However, a staggering series of injuries sidelined her at age 16 and postponed for three interminably frustrating years the fulfillment of all that promise.

But 1979 saw the return of an older, more mature Decker—a runner who had found her health, the key to her reaching the heights in running. And she ran to an American Record mile, a Pan-Am 1500 gold medal and No. 2 ranking in the U.S.

Yet those efforts only served as a preface to her sensational 1980 season—so far. World Record setter in the mile outdoors at 4:21.7, Decker ran even faster indoors (4:17.6), sandwiching an indoor 1500 record of 4:00.8 between and following up with a 1:59.7 880 best. She is a natural as Indoor Athlete Of The Year.

And she has come back with a new frame of mind, a new perspective, a new determination. Mary Decker knows the best still lies ahead.

T&FN: Did you realize that you are the first American woman to hold an official World Record at a distance longer than 200m?

Decker: No, I didn’t know that. It’s a good feeling. It gives me the confidence I need for when I get on the track against all the other competitors, particularly the Eastern Europeans and Russians.

T&FN: You have said before that you were surprised to run so well in 1979. Why was that?

Decker: I was surprised because I was injured for 3½ months early in the year and I started training only about 6 weeks before the AAU meet. I started out with a couple of weeks of just jogging and then started track work about a month before the AAU. So I didn’t have the background, or the track work, to have a really good season.

I didn’t run very many races, but what I did run I was quite pleased with.

T&FN: Has your 1980 season so far, both indoors and out, been an extension of your good running of ’79, or has 1980 essentially been a totally new season?

Decker: Oh, 1980 has been a whole new season. After the ’79 season, I took 10 days off and did nothing at all. I just relaxed and had a good time.

Then I went back to Eugene and started with relatively low mileage and did a buildup to get ready for the season. I just had. I did a lot of background and around the end of November started doing some slow track work to get ready to go to New Zealand.

T&FN: Did you ever reach any kind of peak point this year?

Decker: No, I don’t think I’ve peaked at all. I don’t feel like I have a peaking point because everything I did felt easy and I felt like there was so much more there. And that’s the way I want it to feel. I want it to feel like I can run PRs, run the times I did, and not feel like I totally extended myself.

That gives me the confidence that I can do better this summer. I’m back into a buildup now; I won’t do any track work until the end of April and I won’t race on the track until May 11 at the Pepsi meet.

Last summer after the Pan-Am Games, when I was taking my 10-day break, Dick [Quax] and I discussed what I wanted to do this year and what it would take and we sort of charted out the year. That was with the Olympics in mind, but even if the Olympics don’t happen because of the political situation, there still are things I want to accomplish this year.

T&FN: Once you got back into training last year after that period of injury, did you ever consider that you might have as good a year in ’79 as you did?

Decker: I guess I didn’t really think about how well I might do. When I did get back to training, I knew I didn’t have much time and I knew that what I could do would be limited because of that.

But I was just determined to go out and be competitive. At what level, I wasn’t sure; I just had no idea what I could do.

So the AAU meet [2nd in a then-PR 4:05.8] gave me some indication of what I would be able to do, so therefore when I ran the mile in Philadelphia, I knew I could do reasonably well.

At the Pan-Am Games, I ran fairly well but I think I could have run better. Training there during the week in the heat and humidity took something out of me. I would have liked to have run faster—but maybe that was all the faster I could have run that year, because of my lack of preparation.

I could tell by the time I got to the Pan-Am Games that I didn’t have the background to be able to continue racing well at a high level. I was fortunate to be able to do what I did, so I quit while I was ahead and got into some background training.

T&FN: You ended on a positive note and then got into that tough, hard base training. Do you work with Dick in setting up your programs, or does he do it all?

Decker: He basically does it all. As far as the training I do on the track, he does that 100%. When I’m doing my buildup, he’ll give me a period of time and tell me to start with x amount of miles and build up to y amount of miles, increasing at say 10M per week. That’s what I’ll do and I’ll get to my buildup peak, which right now is 80M per week. I’ll hold that for as long as he wants me to.

As far as pace, sometimes I’ll run under 6-minute pace, sometimes at 6:30. If I’m really tired, I’ll run even slower. He’s mostly concerned that I just run how I feel, just decide for myself how hard I should push myself from day to day during my buildup period.

To him, the most important thing is that I just get in the miles and don’t run myself down. That’s what I’m doing right now.

T&FN: How would you describe your relationship with Quax? Is it difficult to have a relationship as coach-and-athlete between two people who are close emotionally—and vice versa?

Decker: I don’t think so. Dick didn’t become my coach until after my surgery. He was advising me because he’d been through it, he knew what it felt like, he knew what I should do to recover and get on my feet again. We had a lot of contact and our relationship developed out of that.

We’ve never had any problems despite being involved both personally and athletically. I feel that if we decided we didn’t want to be involved personally anymore, it wouldn’t hurt us athletically. I feel we understand each other to the point where we both have our values, our goals and we respect each other for those.

Track & Field News
Decker has been around, but there still are things he wants to achieve. He can respect my feelings and the fact that I am younger and have a lot of what he has already achieved ahead of me. He will do anything to help me—he is my coach. He is experienced, he knows so much about running and preparing for competition.

My training and racing is probably the most organized it has ever been as far as being put on a schedule, sticking to a schedule and reaching for certain goals, having a goal in mind and a real objective to what I'm doing. And Dick has done that.

When I was younger, I just wanted to win races. I looked ahead only to the next race. I didn't think from one season to the next; I didn't have any long-range goals or objectives. I didn't worry about things like build-ups, because I had never heard of them. I didn't have an organized schedule, a program that I knew would help me get closer to what I wanted.

That's what I have now and I have complete confidence in what he tells me. People tell me, "You've been in this sport long enough. Don't you know what to do by now?" I don't and I need a coach. I never was around people who knew what they were doing, but I'm learning so much from Dick. I need someone to be able to call "coach."

T&FN: That brings us pretty much up to your accomplishments in the indoor season. So now let's reflect back on at least some of what has happened in the past. How did you get started running at age 11?

Decker: I was in junior high school in southern California and a girlfriend and I saw a notice on a bulletin board for a park department cross country race. Well, neither of us knew what cross country was; I didn't have the faintest idea.

So we went to the park and took part in the race and I won it. It was the kind of thing that you got to go on to a county race and then a state race and there were coaches from the local AAU girls clubs there scouting the runners.

I actually got recruited to join one of those clubs—come out and train 4 days a week and go to meets on weekends—that kind of thing.

One coach asked me if I liked running like I did that day in the cross country race and I said no. I said I wanted to do short distances—even though the cross country race was only 3/4 mile long. So I started out as a sprinter, running 100s and 200s and quarters.

Then when I turned 12 over the summer and cross country started in the fall, we all found out I was decent in cross country. I guess that was the birth of my "distance running." Then when track season came around, I started running miles and half-miles and distances like that and forgot about the sprints.

T&FN: Success seems to have been almost "instant," but what did you think of running then?

Decker: I was competitive and I wanted to be good at it. Throughout high school, I participated in sports and was always a sports enthusiast. When I found I was good at running, it made me even more enthusiastic toward the sport.

I never thought then about pursuing it as a career to the extent I have. I'd just go to workout after school and be with all my friends and we would have slumber parties throughout the year. It was basically a social activity; we would go on road trips on weekends and things like that.

As I got better and made U.S. teams and went to Europe, I was still serious about it but I didn't think about what it meant and what I wanted to accomplish until I was injured and couldn't do it. Now I have a new perspective in that I know what I want, I know what it takes and I know the direction I want to go.

T&FN: You mentioned about being
MARY DECKER—continued

competitive; would you say you are as
competitive in other aspects of your life as
you are on the track?

Decker: Yes, I think so. When I was
younger, I always wanted to do well in
school and I did, until track took more
priority than school. I still did well in
school, but I wasn't at the level I was
earlier.

I was always interested in art, so I did
well in that. I did pretty well overall in my
classes.

Basically, anything I did I wanted to
be good at. Like you're in journalism so
you want to write the best article you can
and you'll work hard to do that.

"Your Body
Just Doesn't
Burn Itself Out
By The Time You're 20."

T&FN: You can't tolerate mediocrity.
Decker: If you really want something,
there's no room for it. That's how I feel
about my running. I wouldn't be happy if I
couldn't run at least as well as I did in the
past. If I still hadn't run faster than the
2:02.4 I ran when I was 14, I would still
be competitive but I wouldn't be happy with it.

T&FN: As things escalated—you made
your first national team and ranked 4th in
the world for the 800 at age 14 and set
indoor World Records at age 15—do you recall
any particular feelings you had as
things snowballed?

Decker: Well, at that point I don't
really think I realized what I was doing. I
didn't have the full concept of the impact
of it all. To me, it was just going to meets
and winning races. It wasn't the Olympic
Games, but they were just meets I knew I
couldn't run in unless I placed high in the
AAU meet. It was more or less an elite
group that made those teams and I had
won all the races I ran in the United States,
so when I got on the starting line in other
countries, I just wanted to win.

T&FN: Could you ever admit to
yourself, or convince yourself, that you
were good enough to be one of those elite
athletes?

Decker: I knew I was good as far as
the track went, good in the running part of
it. But as far as being on the level of the
others socially and so forth, it was hard for
me to think in those terms because I was so
much younger.

T&FN: Were there many pressures or
expectations that you felt during this time?

Decker: No. The pressures that were
put on me were primarily put there by

myself. For me to run well, I was achieving
something for myself. The team I went
over with didn't put any pressure on me
because I was so much younger and they
really didn't give me enough credit until I
proved myself a little more. No one really
expected me to do as well as I did, so the
pressure wasn't there.

Now, people ask me if there is
pressure and there is pressure, but I put the
pressure on myself because I want to
achieve things. I'm not doing it for
anybody else. I want to do it for myself,
first of all, and then if we go to the
Olympics say, 'I'll run for my country.'

T&FN: Would you say you learned,
good and bad, from all the experiences you
had during your career while you were in
your early teens?

Decker: Well, in terms of competing, I
think I just had a head start on learning
how to compete internationally. Like when
I was 15, I got elbowed indoors by a
Russian and I threw a relay baton at her.
That was a little girl having an emotional
reaction and I would never do that now. I
learned what real, hard-core competition is.
Before that, I couldn't conceive that
people would elbow you or cut you off or
things like that. But I learned the hard way
that it happens.

As far as bad things, I tend not to
think about the bad things because to me
the bad things in my running career were
my injuries. I don't think about those
things now because I'm looking ahead. I'm
not living in the past, not living for what
"little" Mary Decker has done. I want to
achieve more things, better things and I'm a
whole different person.

T&FN: So right after you say that,
I'm going to have to ask you about your
injuries.

Decker (without hesitation): Well,
my injuries started when I was about 15.
The bad ones hit when I was 16. I had a
stress fracture in my right ankle. After 5
weeks in a cast, I started back training and
that's when my shins started aching. As far
as I knew, it was basic shin splints. Oh, you've
probably heard all the stories.

The basic "story" is that, from 1975 and
for virtually the next 3 years, Decker was crippled
by leg pains. She saw doctor after doctor; was
acupressured, acupuncture injected, x-rayed,
administered drugs both legal and questionable.
Then she met Dr. Doug of 1977, she moved to
Colorado and met New Zealand Olympian and
former 5000 World Record holder Dick Quax, He
Listened to her story for a couple of minutes and
then pointed out hairline scars on both his calves.

Quax told her about an ailment called
Compartment Syndrome, caused when the sheaths
of tissue surrounding muscles and splitting them
into compartments fail to expand with the
muscles' growth. By July of that year, she had had
the first of two operations on her calves.

She ran well early in 78, clocking PRs of
2:01.8 and 4:08.9 in New Zealand and an indoor
WR 10000: of 23:26. But she was hit by a bout of
Achilles tendinitis in the spring and just after the
AAU meet in June, her legs started hurting in the
same old way. But a second operation in August
was totally successful.

After winning the '78 AAU cross
country title, Decker ran briefly in New Zealand
before sciatic nerve trouble struck, compounded by
a fall on a rain slick street in Auckland. That problem
cleared up by spring, leaving her a short time to
prepare for the '79 AAU meet—and the rest, as
they say, is history.

T&FN: Is there any way those injury
years might have been beneficial, either
by preventing you from physically
running yourself down, or keeping your
desire up?

Decker: Well, as far as physically
running myself down, I don't think it's
appropriate to say that you are going to
burn yourself out at a young age. Your
body just doesn't burn itself out by the
time you're 20. You keep maturing and
getting stronger and that's my view right
now. I'm maturing and getting stronger.

Mentally and emotionally, it kept me
hungry for competition. I mean, I don't feel I've been in the sport 10 years. It's
somewhat new to me. Maybe it was a
blessing in disguise in that my best years
are still to come and I still want it.

T&FN: What nurtured you, kept you
going, after all the disappointments?

Decker: I think a lot of my feelings
then came from the view that I am a
competitor and I was being defeated. I
didn't know why; nobody knew why.
There were no answers, or solutions and
there just didn't seem to be an end. I feel
that because I am a competitor is why I
didn't give up—plus I like the sport and
wanted to do it.

The thing is, I would start coming
back and start doing well and then
something else would happen. But I
wouldn't give up hope, didn't give up on
myself. Now, the most ironic thing is,
people keep coming up to me and saying,
"Why are you running so well so
suddenly?" It isn't sudden. It's been a
long road, but it isn't going to end here. I
know my best years are ahead of me.

The biggest part of the whole thing
has just been the consistency of training. I've
been able to train since about 6 weeks
before the outdoor AAU last year. I
haven't been set back for a month or 3
months like I was over the last couple of
years since my first surgery.

So it hasn't been suddenly; there are
reasons. It isn't some superhuman thing
as some people seem to think. It isn't
something that my local pharmacist has
given me to make me great—which has been
insinuated, too. That is depressing, and
irritating.

Tom Hintnaus, the pole vaulter, is a
good friend and he gave me a tee-shirt
which reads, "100% Natural—No Chemical
Additives." It's appropriate because the
first questions some people have asked me

Track & Field News

58—April 1980
where would your athletes be if you stopped learning

Would they still be doing the Western Roll? Or scooting sideways to put the shot? Or training only 20 miles per week for the distance events in order to "stay fresh"?

It may seem obvious, but without continual experimentation, and constant learning by the coaching fraternity, our performance levels would be little advanced from those of 30 years ago.

That's why every coach and serious athlete should subscribe to TRACK TECHNIQUE, the quarterly journal which brings you all of the latest articles on training, and technique.

TRACK TECHNIQUE is always useful for its practical articles geared to helping the coach with his everyday coaching and the athlete to perform better. You'll find important articles on coaching, technique and training for all events; training profiles of top athletes; injury care and prevention; motivation; diet and nutrition; mechanics; strength training; tactics and strategy; and much more. All geared toward making your coaching more effective and your knowledge of the sport more comprehensive.

We suggest you try Track Technique, and see why it is the leading journal on the technical aspects of track and field in the country.

One-year (4 issues) $6.50

Order from Track & Field News, Box 296, Los Altos, CA 94022.

Track Technique

FOR THE COACH
WHO DOESN'T KNOW IT ALL

Mary Theresa Decker was born August 4, 1958, in Flemington, NJ. 5-6/125 (1.67/57). Her progress (with world and U.S. Rankings in parentheses): Year Age 800 1500 Mile
71 12 2:12.0 4:35.9 4:55.0
72 13 2:12.0 4:35.9 4:55.0
73 14 2:02.4 (4.1) 4:25.7 4:40.1
74 15 2:02.3 (10.1) -- 5:00.8
75 16 2:08.3 -- --
76 17 Injured
77 18 2:18.3
78 19 2:01.3 (- .3) 4:08.9 (- .5) 4:40.0
79 20 2:03.5 4:06.0 (- .2) 4:23.5 AR
80 21 1:58.31 AR 4:00.81 WR 4:21.7 WR

The Bible of the Sport

April 1980-59