

# MARY DECKER

T&FN INTERVIEW by JON HENDERSHOTT

**H**er achievements during this winter's indoor season have been the beautiful flowers which naturally followed the 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** (laughs): 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 peaking point this year?

**Decker:** No, I don't think I've peaked at all. I don't feel I raced to 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 4:06.8] 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 really become my coach per se until after my surgery. He was advising me because he had 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 any longer, 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





Don Goanby

Decker paces the Big 2 of U.S. miling in the '70s, Jan Merrill and Francie Larriue.

Dick 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 *The Bible of the Sport*

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  $\frac{3}{4}$ M 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 school, I participated in sports and was always competitive. 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*  
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*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 it. Like you're in journalism so you want to write the best article you can and you'll work hard to do that.

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

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**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  
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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 got 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 like. 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 6 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 acupuncture, injected, x-rayed, administered drugs both legal and questionable. Then in the spring 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. Two weeks later, she was back running, without that same old pain.*

*She ran well early in '78, clocking PRs of*

*2:01.8 and 4:08.9 in New Zealand and an indoor WR 1000y of 2:23.6. 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 AIAW 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



are "How?" or "Why?" and the second is, "What are you taking?" Don't they realize I have had enough already that I don't need things like that?

**T&FN:** *You're experiencing the best running of your life on a logical timetable for Olympic participation, so what are your feelings now that the Olympic opportunity might well be taken away from you again?*

**Decker:** Well, I don't even want to discuss the politics of the whole Olympic situation. I'm just burnt out on it. All I will say is that I'm not easing up on my training whatsoever. I'm following basically the same schedule as for the Olympics, with some European meets also in mind and some other goals in mind.

I would love to win an Olympic gold medal, but if it isn't possible, it isn't possible. Maybe I can prove I'm the best in other ways. I'd just like to extend to outdoors what has happened indoors—but do it at the time of the year that really counts. What I would really like is to get into some quality races with those Olympic-level runners. If I can't run the Olympics, I'm still going to run, still going to go for good times and successes against the best people.

**T&FN:** *Do you go into a race shooting for any particular objective, or just to win, or what?*

**Decker:** In a quality race, I go into it first of all with the objective to win. Every time I line up, I never underestimate my competition. Winning comes first, but then if I'm feeling good, I'll go for a time. I'm not afraid to try to run a fast pace; I have to learn to. Women have to learn to.

Motivation? I can't say. What motivates anybody to do anything? Like I said, I'm a competitor, I enjoy the sport and I'm good at it. I wouldn't be out competing if I wasn't that kind of person.

**T&FN:** *How have the experiences of the last 6 or 7 years in your running affected you overall as a person?*

**Decker:** Well, it's made me a stronger person. I think I've had to grow up a little faster than I would have otherwise, particularly emotionally. People think I'm older than I am because I've been around a long time. But I am only 21, and all that has happened has made me grow up faster than I would have if I hadn't experienced the things I have.

I realize now that things aren't just handed to you. I know more about myself, physically and emotionally, and I'm able to really think about things and determine just exactly what I want out of life. □

Mary Theresa Decker was born August 4, 1958, in Flemington, N.J. 5-6/125 (1.67/57). Her progress (with World and U. S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	800	1500	Mile
'71	12			5:06.2
'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	2:08.2	—	—
'76	17	injured	—	—
'77	18	2:15.21	—	—
'78	19	2:01.8 (—, 3)	4:08.9 (—, 5)	4:40.0
'79	20	2:03.5	4:05.0 (—, 2)	4:23.5 AR
'80	21	1:58.91 AR	4:00.81 WR	4:21.7 WR

*The Bible of the Sport*



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April 1980-59