

RALPH MANN

To coin a phrase, Ralph Mann has been around in the intermediate hurdles.

He has not only been around the track and over the hurdles in impressive competitive fashion—to the tune of a world 440 barrier record, US 400 meter hurdles best and an Olympic silver medal in Munich—but he has also been around in terms of experience. He has experienced, and criticized, the frustrations of being an amateur athlete, yet he has lived within the system and performed brilliantly in spite of it.

When the '75 World Rankings are announced in January, Mann is a cinch to score his seventh consecutive ranking. Only Yuriy Lituyev (10) and Josh Culbreath (8) have more, with Rex Cawley equal. But none can match Mann's quality—he has never ranked lower than fourth.

And in the AAU, he is just as impressive. He has run six of the last seven AAU intermediates finals, missing only '72 when he passed the meet. He has never finished worse than second in that competition, winning '69 through '71 and at Eugene this year.

This year's victory may have been the most important for the 6-4/185, 26-year-old Californian, now teaching and completing his master's degree at Washington State. Winning over Jim Bolding at Eugene proved to Ralph Mann he still has what it takes to compete at the high level he has known so long.

And it showed him that come next July, a group of hurdlers in a certain meet in Canada may have to be concerned with a special Mann.

T&FN: Judging from your happy smile at Eugene, the AAU was a big win for you.

Mann: Well, it's always good to win the big ones, but when you beat someone you feel is one of your main competitors, it's extra good. I was really beginning to wonder if I could handle anyone in the world and by beating Jim it showed I still have what I had three or four years ago. It was really satisfying after working hard for the first time in two years and finding I still had it.

T&FN: Why didn't you work as hard the previous two years?

Mann: Munich was a real athletic shock for me, the disillusionment of the Games and all. So I didn't run much in '73 and started fairly seriously only in '74. But I figured if I was going to compete in Montreal, I had better give it one good shot in '75 and see if I still had it, both mentally and physically. I knew I had it athletically, but I didn't know if I wanted it mentally. It all paid off in the AAU.

T&FN: What was the effect of Munich on your motivation?

Mann: I can tell you that if they gave gold medals at Munich for desire, then my medal would go for about \$160 an ounce right now. But so much more than desire goes into winning any prize. I would rank the ingredients something like: 1. talent; 2. desire; 3. coaching; 4. facilities; and finally support, not only from the community,

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but from your country. I truly believe that if I had been given the last three things to the same extent that athletes from other countries were given them, it really would have been a different story.

T&FN: If you had won in Munich would that have been it?

Mann: No. Unlike many athletes who just run for the medals, I really enjoy competition and that's why Munich turned me off so badly. It wasn't fun; it was a fiasco and wasn't enjoyable and I came away very disillusioned. I had to change my outlook quite a bit. Now, instead of trying to enjoy the whole scene, I try to just enjoy the sport for what I can get out of it—and I don't expect much anymore because the athletes aren't running the show. It isn't for the athletes. But there are certain aspects which are enjoyable to me and those are what I try to enjoy.

I just try to be more relaxed in my whole outlook. The mental preparation was so intense in Munich that I'll never go through something like that again. But I was young then and it was a highly emotional experience.

I'm not saying I wouldn't want to win in Montreal just as much as in Munich. It's just that now my outlook is a lot different. I can prepare without getting so emotionally involved. Track isn't a do-or-die effort anymore. It's a more grown-up attitude, rather than a more emotional one. It's not my manhood versus everyone else's manhood when we step on the track. It's my preparation and my ability against someone else.

T&FN: How do you feel about having been supplanted by Bolding as the leading US intermediate hurdler and by several athletes as the world's best?

Mann: Like I said, I wondered if I

could compete with the best. Jim has become one of the very best, but having beaten him in Eugene I know I'm still right up there. With Jim running well and Akii-Bua running well and Alan Pascoe showing his excellence, it all makes for one great race. The best thing about my season this year is that I know I can run with them.

I think those four—John with his superior talent and Jim with his amazing speed and Pascoe with his superior strength, plus myself—have to be among the favorites for the gold medal at Montreal.

My only surprise is that more young hurdlers haven't appeared. There aren't any young hurdlers in this country who have impressed me. The favorites for next year are basically the same people as in '72. That makes me sad because it's an indication that we aren't developing our talent as we should. There is so much talent in this country, but it's so misdirected.

T&FN: You have been openly critical of the amateur system and organizations in this country. Being one of the veterans of many levels of competition, do you feel you should or must speak out on behalf of the athlete?

Mann: Well, you call me a veteran and a critic. It seems those two words go together and I've got a theory why. When an athlete is first exposed to international competition, he is greatly awed; by the talents, the travel, the excitement. I know I was.

T&FN: That's a-w-e-d, not o-d-d.

Mann: The last comes later. If an athlete is good enough to be termed a veteran, he's probably good enough to be one of the best in the world. If he gets to that point, he looks for every possible way

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to become the very best—the best competition, coaching, facilities, support, etc.

But in our country, he can't find all those things, yet he knows athletes in other countries can. So he becomes a critic of our system. There aren't too many real "veterans" around because our system doesn't support athletes when they get out of college so they have to search for a living elsewhere.

The AAU does nothing to aid the athlete once he is out of college. The NCAA isn't the greatest either, but at least it helps develop athletes. It does the only developing in this country and if it weren't for the NCAA, the US wouldn't have a program. The AAU just leeches off the NCAA. The NCAA isn't the best system, but at least it does something to develop the talent in this country.

T&FN: *It's a fact there is money to be made in other countries, but why do you think there is this continual problem in the US?*

Mann: Basically we try to be too honest within the entire amateur system. Maybe officials here have never looked at how other countries do things. But other countries have seen the futility of trying to develop athletes under the present kind of amateur code, so they blatantly break every rule to try to develop their talent. We seem to blatantly support every rule in an effort to seemingly destroy our talent.

What's crazy is that, in talking to Europeans, we're not looked upon as great moral leaders for upholding the system. We're looked on as being pretty stupid. They can't believe we try to operate under the rules we impose upon ourselves.

I personally have a preference for open competition, with amateur, pseudo-amateur and professionals competing against everybody. I could live under any system and so could most other athletes—as long as it's enforced equally around the world. But don't give me this stuff about me having to live under one code while in Europe they live under a different code.

T&FN: *Well, just how serious then are you about Montreal?*

Mann: I guess you can put me down as a definite sort of serious, as serious as my non-athletic life allows me to be. The problem is, I would like to be very serious, but after the mental anguish in '72—not only of Munich itself but also of preparing for Munich—and the frustration of finding out I don't have everything necessary at my disposal, to become the very best, I know that no matter what I do, I won't be able to prepare myself to the best of my abilities.

I really want to go to Montreal and that gold medal is just as enticing as it was in '72, but I guess I'm trying to rationalize myself out of the disappointment of the fact I might not be able to prepare myself 100%.

T&FN: *Then what motivates you in Bible of the Sport*

the intermediates, that you have existed within the system for so long?

Mann: I simply enjoy running, competing and meeting people. I think anyone gravitates toward what he does best and I've found my little niche in the world. I've met a lot of people, traveled to many places and most important I've experienced things that few people ever will. Like lining up for an Olympic final and knowing you can handle the pressure. You really find out what you're made of. Not too many people can put four years of sweat and pain on the line for something that lasts a lot less than a minute.

T&FN: *You said in '72 that the Olympic gold would be the highest you*

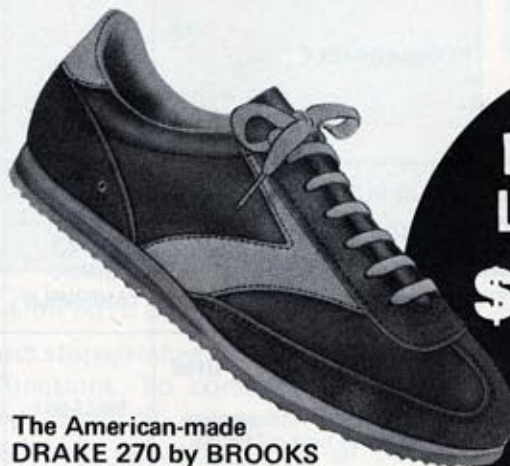
could go.

Mann: If I win it, of course it is. If not, then "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" and all that rhetoric that no one believes. The Olympic gold medal is what every athlete has in the back of his mind; it just supercedes everything else. People place so much importance on it, that not winning one can be a stigma.

T&FN: *But you have had a very rewarding career.*

Mann: But if I had won in Munich, or if I win in Montreal, think of the difference in my career. Instead of being just one step down from the best ever, I would be among the very best ever, just by that one race. That's the whole, very big, difference. □

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