Andrew Rock

by Jon Hendershott

T&FN: Did Mark bring up the idea of you running the 400?

Rock: Well, it was more from me. He actually recruited me mainly as a hurdler and planned on me doing that. I got there in the fall and he met with each new freshman. I just told him that I didn’t want to hurdle anymore and that I wanted to try the 2 and 4.

He said, “This is non-scholarship school, so you can do that. It’s your choice, so we’ll give it a shot.” So it really was my doing, not his.

T&FN: When did you get really serious about the 400? Was there one moment when you began to seriously think of yourself as a quartermiler?

Rock: I guess it was the outdoor season of my freshman year. At our conference meet I ran 46.6 when I hadn’t broken 48 before that. Then I ran 46.52 at nationals [placing 2nd]. Of course, that was a lot faster than I had ever run. And coach Guthrie was pretty excited; it was one of the fastest times he had coached. So I decided that if I kept working at it, I could get my times down even more.

T&FN: Did Mark tell you at some point that he felt you could go a long way in the 400?

Rock: The 25-year-old alum of Div. III Wisconsin-LaCrosse, emerged in the Olympic year to finish 6th in the Trials, run the 4x4 heats in Athens and earn a gold medal. In ’05, he won World Champs silver with a PR 44.35 and last year scored his first USATF title.

Rock’s progress has been born out of hard work and continued belief in his abilities—even if he didn’t go to college to run the 400.

T&FN: What were your high school bests?

Rock: In high school, I was more of a hurder: 14.5 in the 110s, 37.5 in the 300s and I ran 21.8 in the 200. I ran only one quarter in high school and that was like 50-flat.

T&FN: What did you think of the 400 then?

Rock: I didn’t really like it [laughs]. I was happy when I ran that time because it was on a really bad track. But with the 300H probably being my best event, I could have run maybe 48 in high school but no faster.

T&FN: Stratford is about two hours northeast of LaCrosse. Why did you decide to go to a Div. III college instead of maybe a bigger school like Wisconsin at Madison?

Rock: A lot of it had to do with Mark Guthrie. He was the first coach who ever recruited me; he first talked with me after my junior year in high school. He called me a lot and just kept in contact. Madison didn’t recruit me until after the state meet my senior year in 2000, like a year after Mark started.

So I had pretty much developed that relationship with coach Guthrie. I also liked the small-town feel of LaCrosse; at that point in my life I just felt more comfortable there. Plus LaCrosse had a really good tradition in track. So it just felt like the right move for me.
expected to win. I got in bigger races like Mt. SAC and Drake, but I didn’t have the pressure of competing against top guys every week and maybe tiring me out for the summer season.

_T&FN:_ Besides those bigger invitationals, you also began running at the U.S. nationals with your soph year. So there was another big meet where you could gain experience against top guys.

_Rock:_ It was, and I went out to Stanford my soph year in ’02 even though I wasn’t so sure about it. But coach Guthrie said, “You should go, especially if you have any thoughts at all about pursuing running. You can’t miss the opportunity, the experience you’ll gain.” My goal each year was to advance one round farther than the year before.

_T&FN:_ Has your gradual improvement and adding of experience helped keep your mental approach fresher?

_Rock:_ I think it has. I’ve made big improvements since high school, but I’ve had to work for what I’ve gotten. Nothing has been handed to me. Being from a smaller school, I’ve had to earn my way on the scene. But I’ve also worked hard at it.

I’ve also had the thought that I’ve gotten to this point for a reason and I have to keep doing the things I’ve been doing to stay at this level. Especially the way the 400 is in the U.S.: it’s a tough event, a tough team to make.

The minute you relax is when you get into trouble. I just approach things the way I have the last five years and that’s to improve every year.

_T&FN:_ When you first emerged nationally and internationally, there were comments of “Here’s a white kid from a Div. III school.” But does it simply remain a matter of believing in yourself first and not proving anything to anybody else?

_Rock:_ Yes. I don’t know why I would have to prove anything more than any other athlete from a big school. I feel I belong and am good enough to compete at this level, so it doesn’t matter.

When I step on the line, I don’t think, “I went to a Div. III school, but Jeremy Wariner went to a Div. I school.” I don’t think that way anymore.

I was a Div. III athlete and I’m very proud of that. But I don’t see myself as a Div. III athlete now—I see myself as a professional track runner. You have to have that approach to move forward. It just comes down to if you run the times, you run the times.

That’s the bottom line. If you run 44.5, you run 44.5. It doesn’t matter if you’re from Wisconsin or Texas or Florida or wherever.

_T&FN:_ On the other hand, being from Wisconsin, training there, being small town and a smaller school guy, has that somehow made you a tougher runner?
Rock: I think so. Believe me, it’s not that easy to train in this climate. But I think it has helped me. It’s made me more disciplined. If I can go out in the middle of winter to run hills in 10-degree weather, I certainly can run a 400 in 80-degree weather.

It’s also in the way I was raised. My parents taught me the value of hard work. Things aren’t going to be given to you; you have to work for them. It’s just the way it seems to be where I’m from. I really do believe it’s helped me and made me a stronger and tougher runner mentally.

T&FN: Another “benefit” for you of being from Div. III is that you met [Wartburg’s three-time DIII cross country champion] Missy Buttry.

Rock: Definitely. In fact, we’re engaged and are getting married this coming October 6. She has moved to Madison now. She lived and trained in Mammoth last year but got hurt about four times. She didn’t want to be that far from home, so she moved back. She is being coached now by Jerry Schumacher at UW.

If you ask us, we both will agree that part of what drew us together was our love for running and our commitment to it. We just have a lot in common. She has a lot of the same goals I do, so it’s great to have someone there who understands what you’re going through.

T&FN: Have you ever had a major injury?

Rock: I really haven’t. I’ve missed maybe three or four days of scheduled running in about seven years. I’ve been pretty lucky. The most I’ve ever had to take off at a time is two days. I’ve been very lucky.

Also, I have a great strength coach in Dennis Kline at UW–LaCrosse. He threw the hammer at the ’96 Trials, so he knows what athletes go through.

T&FN: You have achieved a great deal and hopefully there will be much more. But you can’t rest on past laurels, can you?

Rock: No. You can enjoy the successes you’ve had, but there is always something new coming up. The last time I was in a title meet, I won the USAs. I enjoyed that for a minute, but the next week, I was in Europe racing again. You can’t settle and be satisfied; you have to move forward.

It’s a Worlds year again and I can’t look back at what I did in Helsinki in ’05. I have to look ahead to what I want to do in Osaka this summer—which is win a medal—and what I have to do to get me there.

As far as time goes, I’d like to PR—I think I’ll need to for a medal. Whatever helps me to win a medal in Osaka is what I want to run. If that’s 44.2, then I want to run 44.2. I do think it will take a PR. I’ll even take just 44.34.