

Andrew Rock

by Jon Hendershott

There is no better current example of a small-school athlete who has matured to reach global heights than one-lap star Andrew 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.

—Rock Facts—

• **Personal:** born Marshfield, Wisconsin, 1/23/82; 6-1/175 (1.85/79)

• **Schools:** Stratford HS, Wisconsin '00; Wisconsin-LaCrosse '04; now represents adidas

• **Coach:** Mark Guthrie

• **Major Meets:** 200—2) NC III '02; 1) NC III '03. 400—2) NC III, 2) NC III '01; 1) NC III, 2) NC III, 6h) US '02; 1) NC III, 2) NC III, 6sf) US '03; 1) NC III, 1) NC III, 6) OT '04; 3) US, 2) WC '05; 1) US, 4) WAF '06. 4 x 400—1) NC III '03 [4], 1) NC III [4]; 1) NC III [4], 1) NC III [4], 1h) OG '04 [3]; 1) WC '05 [1]

• **PRs:** 20.84 '03; 44.35 '05

• **World/U.S. Rankings:** 400: '04—x, 7; '05—3, 2; '06—4, 3

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.

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: In my frosh year at Div. III nationals, I lost by 0.01 to Ben Dreyer. Then my soph year, I lost to him by 0.02 even though I PRed at 46.08 [see picture, p. 38]. After that race, I said to coach, "When am I gonna catch a break?" I was pretty frustrated to lose by those narrow margins.

Mark said, "Andrew, you aren't going to catch any breaks. You have to earn your breaks." He also said, "You're full of talent and you can go wherever you want to go." The next year at the '03 outdoor USAs, I beat Ben by over a second and ran 45.29.

That was kind of my breakthrough race to the next level; the race where I actually thought I could compete against some of the best in the U.S.

At that point, coach Guthrie and I were both excited with the Olympic Trials coming up the next year. We would try to focus more on that.

A luxury being from Div. III was that I could focus on training indoors and yet still do well and win indoor nationals. I didn't have to race a full indoor schedule and could focus on the outdoor season as a senior. So that was the time-period when I thought I could do something well with this.

Also in Div. III, I got used to winning and dealing with the pressure of being



A male track athlete with short brown hair is captured in a dynamic running pose on a track. He is wearing a white USA track jersey with red accents on the sleeves and a blue USA track singlet over it. The singlet features the USA flag, a Nike logo, and the text "USA vs the W&R LD", "ROCK", "USA", and "PENN RELAYS". He has a determined expression, with his mouth slightly open and eyes focused forward. The background is a blurred outdoor track setting.

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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?

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ROCK INTERVIEW

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

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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. □