

Steve Ovett says he doesn't care if he is remembered in track & field after he hangs up his shoes. "As long as I've enjoyed myself, that's great," he explains. "It's not important for me to go down in the history books for being the world's greatest runner—nothing like that at all."

But he will be remembered. His long career has impressed many a fan, friend and foe.

Ovett will be remembered as a man who altered the 1500m or mile World Record book five times; as a man who once won 41 consecutive 1500/mile finals (1977 to 1980); as a runner who once in the span of two weeks ran a 1:05:38 half-marathon and a 3:34.45 1500 to win the 1977 World Cup.

Still, however, people remember the image of him created by the British press. Though easily one of Britain's most accomplished athletes, he was presented most often as "a nasty piece of work."

But that image is a characterization of someone who didn't exist, and more and more people over the years saw Ovett as he really was: a socializing, hardworking and kind person.

Personable and witty, he noted during this interview that American football has indeed become popular even in England. Clubs and leagues now play the sport there but, as Ovett observes, "Most of the guys who go out are about 5-2. I think they like the dressing up in all the gear more than anything. It's like 22 transvestites out there."

Where Ovett is tough and mean is as a competitor. He was out for seven months with an inflammation of the heart sac (which made him unable to finish the LA 1500) and an ensuing infection of the heart valve. Doctors told him he probably wouldn't run again, but that gloomy picture brightened as he was given a second chance at running.

And, as he told us after a road mile victory in California, he's out to make the most of it:

T&FN: We've heard much talk that you're planning a move up to the 5000. Is there a lot of seriousness to that?

Ovett: I think so. I probably would have moved up to the 5000 this year if I hadn't had one or two problems. I was very strong during the season, but unfortunately I didn't have the opportunities to put it together on the track. Minor problems, like a small strain or a small pull of a muscle here and there just threw me off my rhythm a bit.

And, unfortunately, I can't move up to the 5000 without being in the public attention. So when I moved up I wanted to make sure it was a good performance and not a mediocre one, and that wasn't a possibility in the season that I had.

T&FN: Ideally, if things go well for you, what event will you be running in the

European Championships next year?

Ovett: Well, I don't really know. It all depends on the winter season. I mean, I'm a very almost-take-it-or-leave-it sort of guy, you know. If I can get a really good winter,

"Aouita Almost Approaches The Sport With Religious Fervor."

which I haven't had for two or three years—and I do a lot of hard work and get the endurance back—I think I'll be running a lot more 5s than 15s.

That's particularly true in the year prior to a World Championships or Olympics because I think you need that year to get into the event before you go into a really major competition.

So, hopefully I'd like to run some 5s, but then again if I find that I'm in shape to run a really good 15, I'll stay at the 15 and give that a go as well. So options are open at the moment, but it really depends on the winter training.

T&FN: Would you say your move to the 5000 will be an addition to your previous running as a 1500/800 man, or would you be leaving the 800 and/or 1500 for good?

Ovett: No, I don't think I'd leave the 15, but you've got to drop the 8. I don't think anybody runs good 5000s and 800s. There's an indication there that the tough training necessary to produce good 5s is not conducive to running good 8s.

In that respect it's in my mind that you would have to contain that sort of performance, and just get on with doing the job of gaining the endurance for the 5000.

T&FN: You've seen most of the world's best 1500 runners in competition, and have also beaten them. I'd like to get your impressions of a few. Steve Cram.

Ovett: Well, Steve had a phenomenal year. It was *his* year, almost. In England, we tend to have this sort of saying that if one of us has a good year, the other two don't. And next year, another one has a good year and the other two don't, so we seem to take it in turns. In 1983, I broke the World Record and it was my year, apparently. In '84, Seb won the Olympic Games. In '85, Cram broke the World Record. So '86 is my year apparently!

T&FN: Do you see Cram with the potential to be even better?

Ovett: I think so. Steve's got the potential for more. He lives still, a little bit I think, in the shadow of the two of us [Ovett and Coe]. This year he was beaten by Seb and by me, so I think he's always got us there in the back of his mind. I don't know. It's difficult for him. We're a tough act to follow. I think he's got tremendous potential and who knows what he can do in the future?

T&FN: How about the man with such fantastic range, Said Aouita?

Ovett: Yeah, well Said is the only guy I know who gets disappointed when he only breaks three World Records in a year. So, obviously, his aspirations are very, very high. And one can only hope that he isn't a shooting star. He almost approaches the sport with religious fervor.

I always have a certain amount of trepidation as to whether someone should continue doing that year after year after year. I mean, what happens when he's achieved everything or tried to achieve everything, and has to do it again? It's difficult—I know what it's like. I wonder if Said has got that mental approach that is necessary for that.

T&FN: He's spoken very highly of you. I gather he's been with you off the track as well as on it.

Ovett: Oh, well that's very nice. I don't have that much contact with Said, but he doesn't speak English that well, apparently. I mean, he's a tremendous athlete. I just hope that he can get the *full* potential out of himself. I know sometimes he runs so *hard*, almost every race. That in itself is a problem—he's got to time his season, prefer to meet guys when he wants to meet them, not when they want to meet him.

I think he'd be an awesome athlete, but he's got to control himself. That's my *only* criticism of him, if there is one—that he must, you know, relax a little more and aim himself like a bullet rather than a machine gun, you know, spraying himself everywhere.

T&FN: How about Sydney Maree?

Ovett: Sydney. I mean, how would you classify Sydney? One day he runs 4:10 for a mile, the next he runs 3:49. He's what we call an athletic yo-yo: up and down so many times he obscures your appraisal of him. One minute he's superb, the next minute he's perhaps an also-ran.

On his day, Sydney is one helluva a guy to try and beat, because he's just pumping away. And yet on the next day, it's almost as if he doesn't care. So, yeah, Sydney's a yo-yo, but I wouldn't want to

STEVE OVETT



Rich Clarkson

meet him on a good day, when he's high.

T&FN: *How about someone you've raced against for years—Steve Scott?*

Ovett: I think he's the best in America, however, I suppose, for Sydney. Difficult to know about Steve because he runs better, perhaps, in America than he does in Europe. Steve, on his day, runs exceptionally well. But I think maybe on

the big occasion he doesn't produce his goods.

What I'm saying is I think he could do a lot better, to his potential, if he just put it all together in his mind. I don't know why it doesn't come sometimes; maybe it's the big occasion or that the pace is different—I don't really know. I mean, there's been a number of times I've been in

a race and felt that Steve's really going to be a threat and then he just isn't there.

T&FN: *How about the person you've been most often compared to—Seb Coe?*

Ovett: Well, what can you say about the man who's won two Olympic 1500s? He's dominated the sport for a decade, almost. Tremendous athlete, probably even better when the chips are down. But then again, that's the beautiful thing about Seb; he's unpredictable. You never know what to expect; you never know what his performances will produce. But you always know that if he's in the race, you've got problems. And that's the way it is.

T&FN: *How about one of Britain's finest runners, Steve Ovett?*

Ovett: Well, uhh, he's not bad. He's been misrepresented.

T&FN: *A short response!*

Ovett: There's not much to say, really. You've sort of floored me.

T&FN: *How do you manage to live with all that's been written about you in the British press?*

Ovett: We don't buy papers most of the time. It's not worth it. You know what they're going to say; they're going to whack you when you're down, and when you're up they think you're the world. We've learned over the years not to believe what you read in newspapers, which is sad, because I think it doesn't do the sport justice. They're writing what the people want to hear rather than what they should be told.

T&FN: *The result was that the Ovett most of us learned about was a bad guy, wasn't polite. And yet, Coe came across as the good guy.*

Ovett: Oh yeah! That was the framework as to how they were going to sell papers.

T&FN: *Did it disturb you?*

Ovett: No, I thought it was good fun. It was a joke. In many ways it helped me, because no one can be as good as Seb was portrayed. And so he had to live up to one helluva shiny image, whereas if I kicked an old lady in the street everybody expected it! Or if I went across a red light, "Oh, that's Steve."

I suppose Seb had more of a tough time than I did, because he had to live up to this knight in shining armor. You know, if I felt tired and didn't want to talk to someone, I could just go home and get on with the job of running, whereas Seb found himself having to deal with it all the time. Like in Moscow, where he had a press conference, for 80 or 100 people. That's just not my scene. I never was involved with media and imagery creations; just didn't matter to me too much.

T&FN: *Looking back at all the bad luck you've had since 1982—the injuries and illnesses—how have you been able to continue pushing on? Especially to the point where you are able sometimes to*

outdo what you've accomplished before?

Ovett: It's hard, it really is hard. I do love the sport—I love the people, I love the running, I like the atmosphere. So I train hard to keep that. And not just to keep it, but to try to do better each year, because there will be a time, maybe in 5 or 10 years, where I won't be able to do that. So I believe in getting the best out of yourself while you can, and when you're finished, bow out graciously and get into something else.

T&FN: Which of your athletic achievements are you most proud of?

Ovett (a long pause): I guess there isn't one. If there was, I'd think of it quickly, wouldn't I? Probably something really stupid, like maybe winning my first English Schools Championship way back when I was 16. The thrill of winning that is something that winning the Olympic Championship cannot compare to sometimes. It means that the Olympics isn't necessarily the one that you remember all the time.

Maybe just getting back from some of my problems: my first race this year after they told me I wouldn't run again; I won it.

T&FN: Someday you'll be bowing out. Do you have any plans for when that happens?

Ovett: I haven't really thought about it. My training and my racing is a day-to-day thing, and it's almost the same with my thoughts about what to do after. I perhaps shouldn't be that way, but I tend to sort of plan things when I need to.

They've asked me to do lots of things. As far as the sport is concerned, I enjoy coaching younger athletes, I enjoy commenting on the sport. But the way I see it, I don't really want to get into that until I'm finished with what I'm doing now, which is getting what I can on the track. So I don't really consider what I'm going to be doing after I'm through running.

I've had a pretty rough time, and if you've only got so much concentration, you should put it on what you want it in, which is on the running. And if you don't want to do the running you should start looking for other things. I want to run. I want to run and run well for the next 4-5 years, which I think I can do quite easily. I want to set more records, so it's just a matter of getting out there and doing the damn hard work.

T&FN: Looking a little less into the future, what are your plans for Wednesday [October 9]? It's a sort of milestone birthday for you, isn't it?

Ovett: Yes, yes, the big 3-0. So I've made a promise to myself to get under 3-0 as well in the 15.□

Steven Michael James Ovett was born October 9, 1955, in Brighton, England, and is 6-0/155. Married Rachel Waller in 1981. Competes for Phoenix AC and is advised by Harry Wilson. With 56 World Ranking points he is 3rd all-time behind Kip Keino (74) and John Walker (63), and his three No. 1s equal the record held by Peter Snell and Walker.

His PRs (with position on current world all-time lists in parentheses): 100, 11.5 '78; 200, 22.8 '73; 400, 47.5 '74; 800, 1:44.09 '78; 1000, 2:15.91 '79; 1500, 3:30.77 '83 (4); Mile, 3:48.40 '81 (6); 2000, 4:57.71 '82; 3000, 7:41.3 '77; 2M, 8:13.51 '78 (2); 5000, 13:25.0 '77; Road 10K, 28:16 '83; Half-Marathon, 1:05:38 '77; HJ, 5-5 '77; LJ, 20-7 '71; TJ, 41-4¼ pre '73. His World Records: 1500, 3:32.09 tie '80; 3:31.36 '80; 3:30.77 '83; Mile, 3:48.8 '80; 3:48.40 '81.

His placings in major meets: 800—1)'73 Euro Junior; 2)'74 Euro Champs; 1)'75 Euro Cup; 5)'76 Olympics; 2)'78 Euro Champs; 1)'80 Olympics; 8)'84 Olympics. 1500—5sf)'76 Olympics; 1)'77 Euro Cup; 1)'77 World Cup; 1)'78 Euro Champs; 3)'80 Olympics; 1)'81 World Cup; 4)'83 World Champs; dnf)'84 Olympics.

His progression (with World Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	800	1500	Mile
1970	14	2:00.0	4:10.7	
1971	15	1:55.3	4:17.6	
1972	16	1:52.5	4:01.5	
1973	17	1:47.3	3:44.8	4:00.0
1974	18	1:45.76 (8)	3:46.2	3:59.4
1975	19	1:46.09 (10)	3:39.5	3:57.00
1976	20	1:45.44 (6)	3:37.89	
1977	21	1:48.31	3:34.45 (1)	3:54.69
1978	22	1:44.09 (2)	3:35.59 (1)	3:52.8
1979	23	1:44.91 (6)	3:32.11 (2)	3:49.57
1980	24	1:45.40 (3)	3:31.36 (1)	3:48.8
1981	25	1:46.40	3:31.57 (2)	3:48.40
1982	26	1:46.08	3:38.48	
1983	27	1:45.25	3:30.77 (3)	3:50.49
1984	28	1:44.81	3:34.50	
1985	29		3:37.74	3:55.01

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