

T&FN Interview

STEVE SCOTT

by JOHN BARBOUR

Steve Scott. The name is simplicity itself. Easy to read and pronounce, yet it rolls from the tongue with a firm, solid sound.

So what is, as they say, in a name? It is perhaps coincidental, but those characteristics are equally applicable to its owner. The demeanor of Steve Scott, open and relaxed, belies discipline and values with roots that run deep, translating, on the track, into formidable competitive ability.

The American public seems always on the lookout for "the next great American miler," whatever the qualifications implied therein. A 3:56.5 in the '77 Jack-In-The-Box indoor mile, ahead of John Walker and Eamonn Coghlan, again raised those hopes—hopes which, as often as not, are merely cries of "Wolf!" But the half-stride margin that Scott sustained over Wilson Waigwa in the AAU 1500 was enough to convince the most critical observer that this pretender to the mile throne was, in fact, the genuine article.

The stresses of racing in Europe followed, and by the time of the World Cup a drained Scott could only drag himself to a 3:44.0 7th-place. But a new season means new opportunities, and Steve Scott greets them with enthusiasm. His first major effort outdoors, the Irvine Meet of Champions, netted him a 3:53.9 (6th American all-time), and indicated more than enthusiasm. For the race was completely solo: no stiff opposition, no pacemaker. A race which worked precisely according to pre-announced plan. An inkling perhaps, of things to come.

T&FN caught Steve on his way to the Irvine track for one of his first workouts since a 103° fever and sore throat kept him out of the Drake Relays, where he had hoped to become that meet's first sub-4:00 miler. Despite his illness, Steve made an apology to the 19,000 Drake fans over the public address, promising to break the meet record next year. The 4:00 barrier still will be waiting.

T&FN: I heard somewhere that you got into track because you couldn't play baseball.

Scott: [Laughs] Well, I could play baseball. I think I could have been a fairly decent baseball player, but I just didn't see much of a future in it because the competition is so fierce. And I learned early that team sports have a lot of, I guess, favoritism.

Say if you're the coach's pet, or a good friend of the coach, he'll play that kid over one who's better. They don't give you 10—June 1978

a second chance, which is what happened to me my freshman year in high school. I had a very bad start, and the coach never gave me another chance the whole season. Luckily, in my sophomore season the guy did give me another chance, and I did fairly well. I

Diane Johnson



"I'll reach my peak over in Europe."

was going to go to varsity my junior year, but I went out for track.

T&FN: You didn't start running until you were a junior in high school?

Scott: Right.

T&FN: You went to a high school [Upland] with a pretty fair running tradition.

Scott: Oh, I believe it's one of the best in California.

T&FN: Was it a big deal to be a

runner there? Did running have a greater stature than at other schools?

Scott: Oh no, there's no greater stature. . . Let's see, my sister was on the Pep Squad. You know, the Pep Squad has a lot to do with getting people out to meets, or how important a certain sport is, and the year she was there—which was my sophomore year—it was fun because she'd get everybody to go out, all those girls, and then they'd bring their friends. It was pretty exciting that year, but after that, it went back to normal, being a secondary sport to football. I think the big difference has been with the coach. He's a real fine coach; I guess he's just like [Irvine coach Len] Miller. He gets to know the athletes and helps them mature, their personality as well as their physical education. The environment didn't have a lot to do with it; we were living in the smog belt of California.

T&FN: Going to school relatively close to the place where you grew up must have made going to Europe last year a greater culture shock than for someone who, say grows up here and goes to Harvard. Was that an especially great change?

Scott: Yeah, it was. What you say is true. If I had gone to school farther away, I think the change would have been a lot easier. But one of the reasons why I picked a school so close is that I was still going with a girl while I was looking for colleges, so I wanted to go someplace close.

T&FN: That'll do it.

Scott: [Laughs] Yeah, that had a lot of influence on me. But really, I think about it, and I like being close to my family. I think it would have been fun to go someplace farther away, but I wanted to stay close to her. As it turns out, I'm glad I did, 'cause it's given me a chance to stay close to my family; which we've been all of my life, a really close-knit group. And I'm still going with the same girl. . .!

T&FN: Is your family pretty supportive?

Scott: Oh yeah, they're very supportive. They said they'd put me all the way through till the Olympics, which is

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really nice. You know, that's something a lot of people can't get. When you have that much support, then you figure you have to do that much more work, to make the people appreciate what they're doing for you.

T&FN: *The last 2 years have seen Steve Scott come from being just a guy in a UCI jersey to the premier miler in America. How has that affected you?*

Scott: I hope it hasn't changed me that much. It's made me more confident; I go into a race and I know that other people are watching out for me, which makes me feel good. To know you're the favorite going into the race, it adds to your confidence, and it just keeps growing and growing. It started to affect me early last year, and you can see how it has affected me this year. My confidence is higher, my goals are higher, and my expectations are higher.

T & F N: *What is the social-academic-athletic environment like at Irvine? Is it a help or a hindrance?*

Scott: Socially, I guess if it were anybody else it would be a hindrance, but for me I think it's a lot better. It's relaxed, and we party up a few times.

The people aren't really into track and field. In fact the people at Irvine really aren't into sports that much, which is another thing, I think, that keeps me humble. You walk across campus and people don't recognize you or come up to you, you know. That's kind of nice. Academically, this is an "institution of higher learning" as they say. The people are into their own studies, which is good for them, and I'm happy for them, but I kind of wish there could be more support out on the track. But it is an academic school.

T&FN: *Bold racing tactics are nothing new to you. Are you naturally aggressive, or do you simply prefer to control a race that way?*

Scott: I think both. I think I am more aggressive than most people, and being in front gives you a chance to control the race, and you feel that other people have to run your race in order to beat you. I haven't had a chance to race the prime competition in that fashion—taking the lead and holding it the whole way—but I'll probably try that, among other ways of running the race, later on this year. You can't do that every time; you can't run a 3:53 every race, but I'll try different things.

T&FN: *You seem to be a strength-oriented runner, and yet you do have a very good 800 time [1:47.6]. Do you think you could play the wait-and-kick game?*

Scott: Yeah, I think I could. You know, you build up a certain amount of strength and that strength helps your speed. Just like a sprinter; a sprinter's got to be really strong, both upper body and lower body. And I think that's where I'm helping myself. I'm building my upper body strength, and my legs through hill workouts.

Bible of the Sport

T&FN: *Your racing style is akin to Dick Buerkle's, at least in that you prefer to be in front when the real racing starts, in the second half. Hypothetically, how would you race him?*

Scott: I think, with him, I'd have to feel it out the first lap. I mean, if he was going to be aggressive and take the lead, I'd go ahead and let him and just sit on his shoulder. But if he was going to sit back and run a slow pace, then I would take over. Maybe pick up the third lap, like I did at the Bush Relays, come through in 57 for the third lap, or possibly faster, and then just try to pound through the last lap. I have the confidence where I think I could kick with anybody right now.

T&FN: *Consider the ultimate race: a hypothetical Olympic final right now, with Walker, Oveti, Buerkle, Coghlan, Bayi, and Wessinghage. Pace-setters, fast kickers, long kickers. How would you approach it?*

Scott: If I knew I was getting into a race like that far enough in advance... well, that's basically what I'm doing now, I imagine, is trying different race plans and seeing which ones I'm most comfortable with.

What I'd eventually like to get to is a race plan where I'm going to run the race so fast, that if they are going to beat me then they're going to have to run faster than me. You know, plan on running 3:33 or 3:32, something like that—and hopefully that's the point I want to get to—and if they want to beat me it's a matter of them having to go through that pain and being in that kind of shape.

T&FN: *Basically a survival of the fittest situation, then.*

Scott: Right.

T&FN: *Now that you've said that, your words remind me of the kinds of thoughts Prefontaine used to express. At the same time I get a very different feeling from you. He was one who was considered as imbued with a "killer instinct." You seem to be tenacious and tough, and yet I don't sense a killer instinct. How do you view yourself?*

Scott: [Laughing] I don't have any killer instinct. On the track and off the track, I'm friends with all the guys that are out there. I try to be, I try to talk to them and everything. It's really all in fun. The sporting life makes it fun; sometimes I'm going to win, sometimes I'm going to lose. And it's neat to see who's going to win this time and who's going to win that time. I'm not really a killer about it at all; however, I'm very proud and I want to win every time. My pride has a higher priority than a killer instinct.

T&FN: *Has it ever occurred to you that to break Ryun's record might be like Roger Maris hitting 61 home runs, kind of like beating a legend?*

Scott: I don't know; I never thought about how people would react. I just want to do it just because, well, "because it's there." It would probably be like when Macdonald broke Pre's record: I don't

think people made that big a deal about it.

T&FN: *Do you consider yourself on a par with the world's greatest milers, like John Walker and Steve Oveti?*

Scott: Um... yeah; I don't want to sound conceited or anything. I'd say, yeah, definitely, because I have to. If I don't consider myself as one of the best in the world, then I won't be able to beat the ones that are. I've got to think of myself right now, that if I get into a race with any of those guys that I'm going to beat them. And I have the capability to beat them, I just have to have that feeling all the time.

T&FN: *How do you feel about being looked upon as the premier American miler?*

Scott: I don't mind. I don't know why it turns out that way, but in any sport, I've been in the event that usually gets all the coverage. Like in baseball I was a pitcher. But it's not that bad, as far as pressure being put on me by the press. I don't let that get to me. I just go out and do my best, and hope that I can run to the best of my ability.

T&FN: *What are your plans for 1978?*

Scott: I was planning on putting myself into a position where I could run a fast time this Sunday [Pepsi Invitational], but I don't see how I can do it coming off this. So excluding that, the rest of the year looks like our PCAA meet—I'll probably be tripling there, in the 1500, 800, and 5000—and after the PCAA I'm going to take a couple of weeks off and get ready for the NCAAs and AAUs, and hopefully by those two races I'll be able to come up with a good fast time.

T&FN: *Is your training and your approach to the season any different from last year?*

Scott: Oh, yeah, it's completely different. I've been keeping my mileage up all 3 months instead of coming down each week before a race where I thought I'd run a fast race, and I'm picking the races where I'm planning to run fast very carefully. Last year I would just try to go out and run fast every race, and set a PR every time I could. I was doing it on my own, and not being happy with the times I was running. It was a bad situation all around.

This year I'm picking the races where I want to run fast, where I'm going to take out the pace, and things have worked out pretty well so far. Everything has been going just as planned, and I'll reach my peak over in Europe, hopefully.

T&FN: *Did that approach to racing cause you to burn out last year?*

Scott: Yeah, it did. I'm glad I did it the way I did, because I got into a lot of different racing situations, and it was a great experience. I learned what I did wrong, the way I was racing and the way I was taking it mentally. But in the final outcome, it was not the right thing to do.

T&FN: *What implications does the fact that you are a standout runner now have on your life, say, 10 years down the road?*

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Scott: Well, first of all, I'm hoping that it will secure me financially in the future. Hopefully in '80 I'll make a name for myself and be able to come back after the Olympic Games and have somebody offer me a job where I can financially support a family, which I'm planning to start after the Olympic Games.

Socially, you'd probably make more friends, because it's easier getting to know people; they might recognize you and then that's a starting point for a conversation. I'm wondering how it's going to affect me when I'm older, all the running and the strain on my body. Whether positively or negatively, we'll find out in about 50 years.

T&FN: According to legend, top milers are theoretically supposed to be "all-American" types. Do you feel like an all-American?

Scott: Yes, I do. I consider myself an all-American. Basically, because I appreciate the country that I'm living in—I wouldn't trade it for any other country in the world—and it gives me a pride, whenever I do race people from other countries, to know that I am from the States. It's an added incentive.

You want to do your best so you can represent your country. And I know that America has had a history of excellent milers, and I'd like to keep that tradition going.

T&FN: You mentioned before that your family is closely-knit. What influence has that had?

Scott: It's a heavy influence. We're a very close-knit family, a very moral type of family. I was brought up on, not really religion—well, I wasn't brought up on religion at all—it's just that the morals are about the same as you'd find in religion. You shouldn't cheat, or talk down about your neighbor, just all these kinds of things that are just the right things to do.

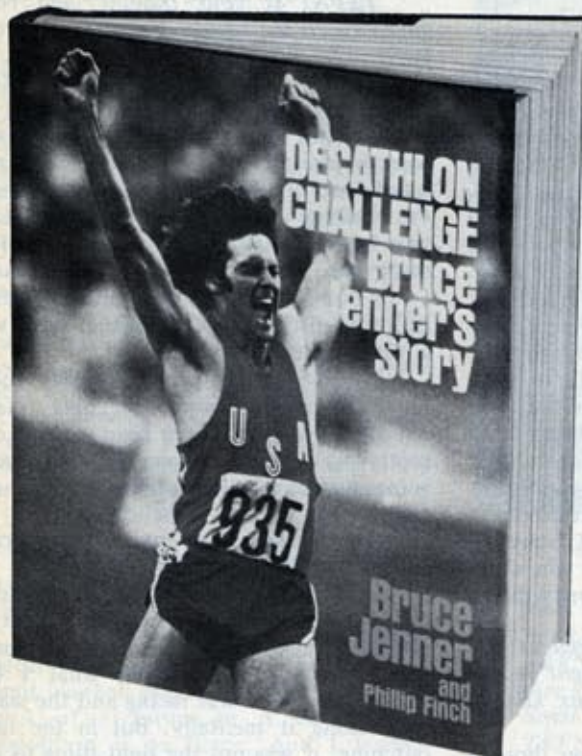
T&FN: In a nutshell, how would you describe Steve Scott?

Scott: Oh... I would say, kind of—at first it would be hard to get to know me. I'd be hard to approach, and then once we got to know each other we'd become really good friends. Like if we're in the same room, I don't think I'd ever go and introduce myself, it's that kind of thing. But if you were supposed to come up and talk to me, then we'd start talking pretty easily. It's just the point of the first encounter: "close encounters of the first kind."

Besides that, I'm a fun-loving guy; I'm open to do almost anything; go out and have a good time. A good thing to have, but sometimes I think I go a little overboard on it, is that I think I care more about other people than I do about myself. I'll go out of my way to try and help other people. That's it in a nutshell!

T&FN: Well, I don't want to make you late for your workout...

Scott: Oh, that's all right, I've still got 9 minutes. We've been brought up very strict here at Irvine. □



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