

Matt Tegenkamp

by Don Kopriva

In his first year as a pro, Matt Tegenkamp emerged as one of the brightest lights on the fast-improving U.S. distance scene in '06. After an injury-plagued—yet successful—collegiate career at Wisconsin, he has now been enjoying a run of health. It showed in his racing, as he earned a No. 2 U.S. Ranking and threatened the 13:00 barrier in the 5000 while mixing it up strongly with the big boys on the European Circuit.

The 5K will be his sole focus this year, and—barring a sudden change of plans—almost certainly in '08 as well.

He would have liked to run a 10K last year but it didn't fit his training and racing schedule.

As for a marathon, he wonders what he could

do and figures one will be in the cards sometime down the road, but he laughs as he points out that "I've got to get the 10K first... and then there's another 20 miles to go."

T&FN: Why didn't you run U.S. cross and, presumably, Worlds?

Tegenkamp: My season went very long last year and, after taking time off, and trying to build back my base, I just didn't think that I was in the kind of fitness I needed to be in to run well.

The second part of it was that the race was at altitude and I've never done any training or racing

whatsoever up at altitude.

Honestly, things went so well on the track last year that I didn't want to anything to jeopardize this season, and I felt like doing all that traveling and racing over there that I would be taking a chance of something happening and having a negative affect on my track season.

T&FN: After Mombasa, did you have second thoughts or were you happy you didn't run?

Tegenkamp: There were [thousands of] people there. I don't know if we'll see that kind of fan support for it again anywhere. It would have been neat to see and would have been a

great experience, but overall, I think I made the right decision.

T&FN: You didn't have any fear of the heat? It could be really hot in Osaka and Beijing.

Tegenkamp: Yeah, it very well could be. I've heard that it will be very humid. But I grew up in hot, humid weather and that's something that I've always run well in, so it doesn't bother me too much.

T&FN: When you finished 5th in World Cross in '01, did you have any international awareness, in that you and Dathan [Ritzenhein, who won the bronze] were kind of carrying the banner for a talented group of young American distance runners?

Tegenkamp: I was kind of in my own little shell at that time. I didn't know a lot of the history of the sport, coming in as a freshman. I was starting to learn about some of the guys I was competing against, but I didn't know anything about the international scene.

I think a function of that race was just, I knew I was fit, but we had heard from the Seniors the day before that our placing wouldn't change much because of how muddy and cold and windy it was, and that we should just run a tough, grind-it-out race.

Ritz and I knew we could run together, got out front and kept pushing as hard as we could.

T&FN: Did you then realize that, "Hey, I can be pretty good"?

Tegenkamp: That definitely was the eye-opener. I had had aspirations about continuing on and trying to make a life out of running, but that was the first time where I could see making an Olympic team and becoming a professional could be a reality.

T&FN: It seems as if you couldn't get through a full year in your five years at Wisconsin without being injured. We've joked about how you've grown so much, but isn't there something to the notion that your growth spurt may have contributed to your being hurt?

Tegenkamp: I think it was a combination. No matter who you are, there's a change in mileage from high school to college, but when you're doing that and there's a huge change in intensity; those



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two things along with my growth and maturing were just too much for my body to handle.

As a younger athlete, I had a bunch of people telling me what to do, but I could just never figure it out myself.

It took me three years to learn how to learn from my injuries, make the necessary adjustments and apply those my last two years of college and onward now [see sidebar].

T&FN: How is it training with that competitive bunch in Madison, with Bairu, Solinsky, Riley, et al? Do you feel a need to lead workouts?

Tegenkamp: We generally alternate and generally the last repeat is the fastest one and that's when I'd try to lead and push a little bit harder.

It is a very competitive group but it's always controlled so you don't have to lead. It's never been something where I've left everything on the track in practice.

T&FN: On that point, then, how does that philosophy work—that idea of leaving something in the tank, not hurting to the fullest extent? Does running a 13-minute 5K take you to your highest pain threshold? Or does it feel like 13:44 once felt?

Tegenkamp: I can't really comment on that because I've only done it once, but I can say that anywhere from that 13:10–13:20 range is much easier.

It's something I can go out and pretty much do, whereas, at the start of the season I could be running 13:30 where now I could run 13:20 or a little under and say that was hard work but a great starting point.

I gained from running the 13:04 last year and knew coming into the Tyson meet this year that I could run in the mid-7:40s. Once I got into the race, it's like my legs just remembered. It wasn't even hard—I was just so used to having that 30-second 200, lap after lap.

T&FN: Jerry Schumacher's philosophy in cross and track has always been one of "train more, race less." Have you been happy with that?

Tegenkamp: Oh yeah, definitely. With the group we have here in Madison, we don't have to go out and race all the time. We can get just as good a training in as we can in going out and racing a whole bunch. We just take our time.

Jerry has a very specific plan: he picks the races out and fits in the workouts in between those races,

so it's not just something we decide suddenly each weekend.

T&FN: Is racing itself the only way you can get accustomed to the discomfort of racing? Do you have to be willing to go through that pain barrier to be successful?

Tegenkamp: You can just kill yourself in workouts, go all out and have nothing left, then go and race. Some people have great success

Learning How To Recover

Matt Tegenkamp says the secret to his escaping injury woes was to learn on his own that less can be more:

"After the World Championships in cross, I thought, 'Well, I did this, so I've just got to work extremely hard to become better.'

"I just went out every day and just hammered myself into the ground trying to train. My philosophy was that I had to train harder than anyone else out there. And that just killed me and it caused a lot of injuries.

"I've always said that coaches and athletes who are older can always tell you what to do but it takes the athlete himself to figure out what's going on and what he needs to change and until that time, injuries keep happening.

"It took me until my redshirt junior year that I figured out that I needed to slow down, take my recovery days and let my body rest, and then really work the hard days. I've had a long stretch now of my body being healthy and am starting to reap the benefits of it."

with that. They go and race themselves into shape, so to speak, during practice.

Jerry's philosophy is that we learn from specific race paces in practice, but we never go over. We always have just a little bit left. We just teach our bodies the pace we're supposed to run in practice.

But we know we could hammer if we needed to. When it comes to a race, we just kind of roll with the pace. But I learned last year, off the type of training we do, that I don't want to wait until the last 400. We're very good at changing gears from a long way out.

There's no reason for me not to take a race from 800–1000 meters out and really try to push that last part of the race.

T&FN: Did you have any sense of panic when, say, Ryan Hall took the race out hard and away from the pack in the nationals 5K last June?

Tegenkamp: The big thing is, there's always a pack and you just never want to let that lead pack go. That's where our racing strategy comes into effect. It makes it very

Teg The Author

Many modern athletes have a web presence, but few do it as well as Matt Tegenkamp, who not only regularly provides deep insight into his racing and training, but also answers questions on those subjects.

www.chasingkimbia.net is where you'll find the musings we headline as "Teg Talks."

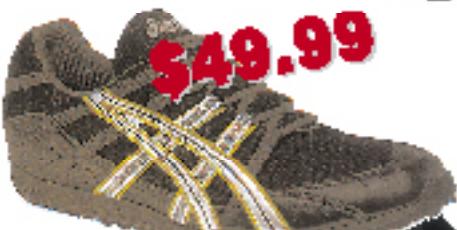
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Tegenkamp Interview

easy to adapt.

We have a race plan in our head, but it can't always go to plan, so when you're within that lead pack, you can be ready to cover moves by anybody or if the situation arises, where it's time for you to kick in your race plan. We're always ready for it, and even if one person gets away, most of the time the lead pack's going to end up catching up.

T&FN: After six years with Jerry, do you see a big difference with your high school training?

Tegenkamp: I was very lucky. My high school coach, Dave Denny, also coached Joe Falcon and so he really knew what it would

"If I can compete with Bernard Lagat I can compete with anybody"

take on the European scene because he coached Joe again after Arkansas.

While he didn't know if I'd make it to that level, he coached me as if I would. We did a lot of similar training to what we do here at Wisconsin. So there wasn't so much a change in coaching philosophy as much as there was in intensity and trying to up the mileage.

T&FN: So, for a Missouri boy used to heat and humidity, why Wisconsin instead of some other distance power?

Tegenkamp: I chose Wisconsin because of those similarities. Even with the injuries, they just happened and may have happened anywhere I would have gone. The good thing was Jerry didn't lose sight of me; we worked through what was going on and learned. We've got good strong communication on how to get things done.

T&FN: Any other runners you admire, and why?

Tegenkamp: That's a hard question. [Adam] Goucher's a good example of never giving up. He was phenomenal out of college and then things didn't go well for him but now he's right back where he was.

I thought Hall was insane for going to run a marathon, but he's stuck to his guns and found something he's really driving at and he's listening to his coach.

The guys in the U.S. are getting the sense that we're starting to make a dent on the world scene. We're all really young, and hopefully it will mean not only making finals at Worlds or Olympics but winning medals.

T&FN: Are you bothered being second fiddle to Bernard Lagat?

Tegenkamp: I'm never going to concede. I'll always compete with him the best I can. As an athlete it was hard to take [being behind him in U.S. rankings] but on the other hand it's made me very hungry. He's only a few seconds ahead of me. Going after him motivates me a lot.

If I can compete with him I can compete with anybody. □