

ALBERTO JUANTORENA

This isn't your typical *T&FN* interview, because interviewing Alberto Juantorena is no easy task. One can't just traipse off and see him any old time. He's tough to find, and tough to pin down.

It was with no small amount of excitement then, that I arrived in Dusseldorf and was told by the first person I met, "Juantorena's looking for you." Far out! We had wanted to interview him for ages, and I had been packing a plaque honoring him as 1976's Athlete of the Year around Europe for almost 2 weeks.

After this auspicious start, it was therefore rather disheartening when the first five things he said to me were "NNO!, amghlsrstv, mmm, mmm" and "mmm."

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The first response comes the next night on the warmup track. I'm not a fan of opening ceremonies, so I hang around outside to play a little Frisbee with some of the U.S. team.

Suddenly, there he is—The Man. Knowing that he is dying to meet me and to get his plaque (I still don't know how he knew I had it), I make my move.

Forgetting that your typical U.S. athlete is loose and relaxed, and that some of the more-disciplined athletes from the rest of the world might take pre-race preparation a bit more seriously, I approach him, flashing my best toothy grin, with hand extended.

"Hi Alberto, I'm Garry. . ."

"NNO!" Abruptly turning on his heel, he stalks away.

"But I have a present for you," I whimper in my most plaintive voice. End of Round I.

Shortly thereafter, Juantorena takes his Round II with Mike Boit.

I am awakened early the next morning by a call from the ubiquitous Tassos Verghitsis, who claims to know just about everyone in the world, and may be right.

An expatriate Greek, Tassos has said, "Track and field is my life, and *Track & Field News* is my bible."

He knows we wanted Juanto. "I have arranged a half-hour interview at the Rheinstern Hotel in one hour," he says.

Grabbing former Staff Writer Don Steffens for some moral support (and

T&FN Interview by Garry Hill

because he is an astute inquisitor), we head off. Racing through the rain-swept streets of Dusseldorf in our cab, I am filled with doubts. What if he still doesn't want to talk to me? My thoughts turned to an early-summer story in France's *L'Equipe*, which said that Juantorena got along well with American blacks but was standoffish to the WASP Pacific Coast Club. Will I too be stung?

The Rheinstern Hotel is a mob scene. Dozens of youngsters crowd the sidewalks, begging autographs from anything remotely resembling an athlete. They don't ask us.

The lobby is today's version of the noted bar scene in *Star Wars*. A group of Africans, bedecked in orange warmups, in one corner, a bunch of green-clad Asians in another. Stacks of vaulting poles in the hallway. American coaches/recruiters making last-minute pitches to exacerbate the foreigner problem. Shoe salesmen pushing their wares. A pair of East Indian weightmen holding hands (no, Anita, customs are different there).

A quick phone call, then an elevator ride with Karl-Hans Riehm to the 6th floor. A tentative knock on the door. No direct response, but heads poke out of adjoining portals. Eyes stare. You can read the minds: "Who are these mere mortals who dare to knock on the door of the great Juantorena?"

Another knock, and still no response. Then the realization that the bouncing beat of music isn't the hotel's hallway Muzak. It's coming from *inside* the room. A couple of vigorous fists produce results.

"Amghlsrstv," says Juantorena, toothbrush clamped between his teeth, lips flecked with foam. Clad in one of the skimpiest pairs of red bikini underwear known to man.

"My God!" I think. "He's human

after all! He has to brush his teeth, just like we do."

While we wait for Alberto to finish his ablutions, we take the lead offered by his pointing finger and move into the main room, walls vibrating with sound.

On the dresser is a massive record player, pumping its notes through a pair of large floor speakers. The volume is cranked all the way right and we are treated to what seems like a thousand decibels worth of the Isley Brothers. Of course, if we didn't like that, we could have chosen something else from the healthy stack on the floor.

The room is strewn with the memorabilia and clutter of 6 months on the road. And enough adidas bags to carry it all. There was obviously joy and celebration after the victory over Boit. A champagne bottle (unopened) is on the dresser and the ashtrays are full.

And still trying to sleep through it all is roommate Alejandro Casanas, the world 110 hurdle record holder. He acknowledges our presence, then once more tries to hide his head under a bundle of blankets and a pillow.

Juantorena glides back into the room. What a specimen! He may be The Horse (*El Caballo*) when he runs, but slinking around the room virtually au naturel he is definitely *El Tigre*.

Not an ounce of adipose tissue clings to his body. You a body culture freak? You like his quadriceps and hamstrings? You ought to see where they dive back under the skin at point of insertion. But his anatomy (6-2/185, born 3/21/51) is well-known. It's his head into which we want to get.

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Trying to get a cogent interview done in a mere 30 minutes is a pretty tough task. *Playboy*, for example, tells you that its famous interviews take place over hours and hours in a period of months. We never take nearly that long, but certainly a lot more than the half-hour allotted to us here. And we are without the benefit of a translator, working solely on our subject's knowledge of English.

What emerged for us was a fascinating picture of Juantorena. While there was just a bit of the mandatory revolutionary rhetoric one finds in virtually every piece



Peter Probst

written on him, it was not an all-abiding passion. He's an athlete who travels the world. And perhaps his travels and views into different cultures are depoliticizing him.

We also saw a very intelligent, probing mind. Very rarely did we have to rephrase a question. And he was able to quickly cut through to the heart of the matter.

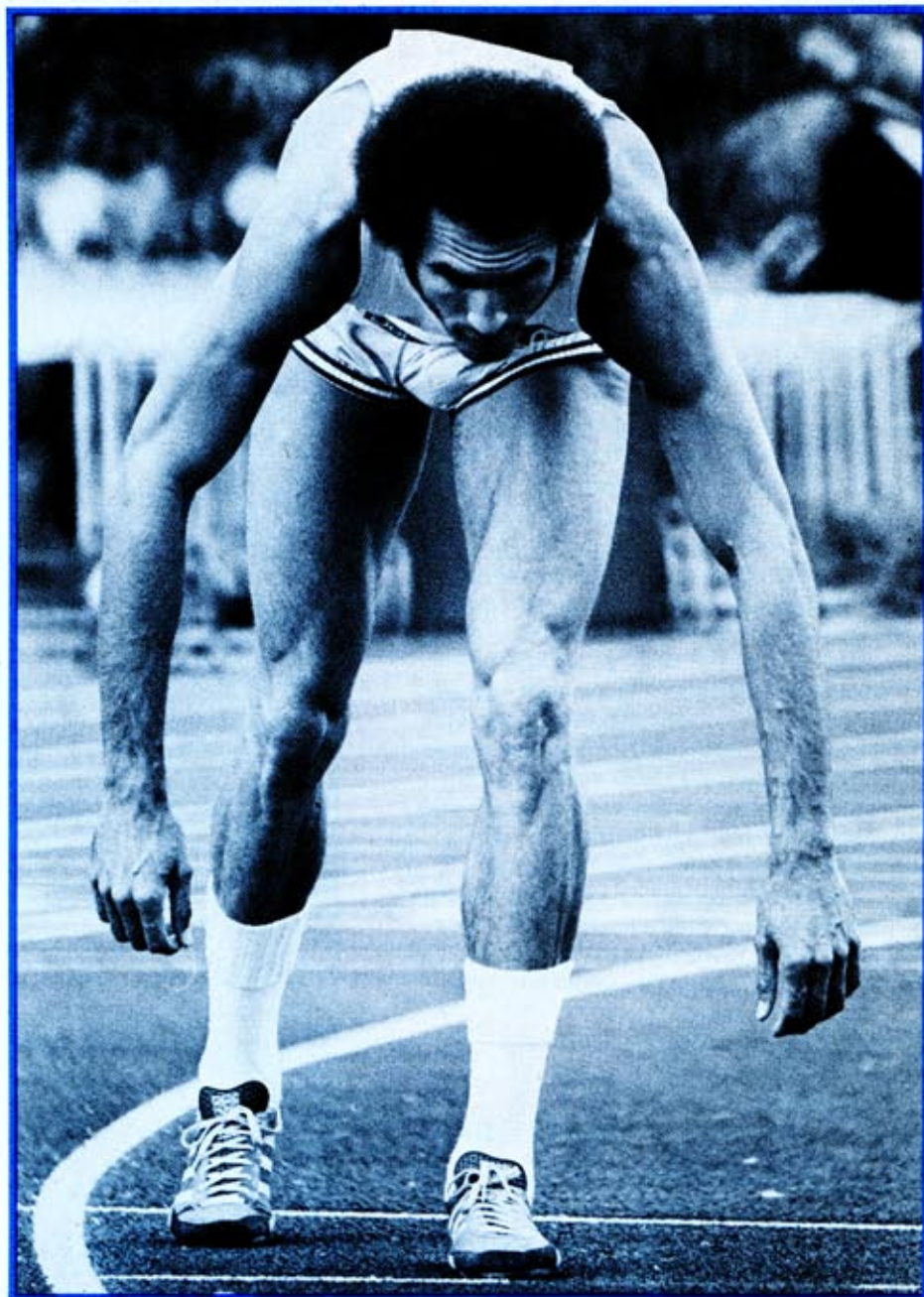
Terribly pragmatic, he did not give trite, embellished answers to simple questions. Rather, there was a look of "Why are you asking me *that*? You already know the answer," and a noncommittal grunt. At least he doesn't get misquoted that way.

His eyes are alive, ever-twinkling. And his mouth is in an enigmatic slant. He appears constantly bemused. Was he laughing at us? I got the feeling throughout our session that he was playing cat-and-mouse.

I don't think he likes journalists, and he probably isn't a fan of Americans. But he knows the value of promotion, and he knows *T&FN's* place in the world. He wants to be known as the world's best, and he wants the U.S. to be prepared for his coming.

Things begin slowly as our first three utterances—introductions, an apology for interrupting his pre-race psych, and congratulations for being the 1976 Athlete of the Year—provoke "mmm, mmm" and "mmm."

With great ado, I produce his plaque and present it. After a long pause, in which *Bible of the Sport*



Mike Street

Juantorena examines every square centimeter, the interview is underway, albeit a bit disjointed:

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T&FN: You must have a lot of awards and trophies.

Juantorena [after another long pause]: First one like this.

T&FN: Well, maybe next year you will get another one. Now that you are running the 800 more and more, do you like the 800 more than the 400, less, the same?

Juantorena: More the 800.

T&FN: Do you feel that you can run different kinds of races now, start slow, start fast, it makes no difference?

Juantorena: None. I can change my speed now.

T&FN: Were you surprised last night when it was slow in the first quarter?

Juantorena: No.

T&FN: Did you know that Boit was always right behind you?

Juantorena: I was all the time waiting for Boit's attack.

T&FN: You could tell on the curve when he started to sprint?

Juantorena: Yes.

T&FN: You never thought he would catch you?

Juantorena: Never. I have fought with him, both of us running fast laps and running slow and I beat him both times.

T&FN: You travelled around a bit in Europe this summer.

Juantorena: Sweden, Poland, Hungary, many places.

T&FN: Which countries do you like to visit in Europe?

Juantorena: Some countries are very nice. It is too difficult for me to choose

between them.

T&FN: Do you like to go and visit the castles, the old buildings?

Juantorena: And museums and gardens. Especially gardens.

T&FN: You like flowers and trees?

Juantorena: And grass green. Green grass is nice. I like to run on it.

T&FN: After Montreal, you said you were glad that your country had given you the chance to compete and there were stories that you were going to go back and work in the canefields. Did you?

Juantorena: Every Cuban works in the sugarcane. Everyone helps the Cuban economy. For me it was 4 years ago. I could not help last year because it was during my preparation season. Before I was a runner I helped with the harvest. That lasts for 6 months. I did it for 2 years when I was in the army.

T&FN: Does everyone in Cuba go into the army?

Juantorena: Everybody is proud to defend the Cuban Revolution.

T&FN: A German paper said that Premier Castro came down out of the mountains near where you live.

Juantorena: Yes, just 2 years after I was born.

T&FN: After you became Olympic champion, how many times did you get to meet Premier Castro?

Juantorena: Two times. He was all the time talking athletics because he was an athlete who was a basketball player and 800-meter man.

T&FN: What was his best time?

Juantorena [laughing]: You know, he told me he could never run less than 2 minutes.

T&FN: One question I've always wanted to ask you: do you miss basketball?

Juantorena: Yes, I was a basketball player first—but bad.

T&FN: Bad?

Juantorena: Yes, bad.

T&FN: Do you ever play it for fun?

Juantorena: Never for fun, it was on the National Junior Team.

T&FN: No, no. Now, do you play for fun, relaxation?

Juantorena: Just for preparation. Preparation for athletics.

T&FN: Do you do other sports?

Juantorena: Swimming.

T&FN: I'm glad. I sink [laughter all around]. In America, after the Montreal Olympics, you were probably the most popular athlete, maybe even more than Bruce Jenner. I think you will have a very strong following on the day you come to America and you will draw very big crowds and they will clap very loudly. Would you like to come someday?

Juantorena: Why not? If we have close relations, all is possible.

T&FN: How about in Canada?

Juantorena [reaching under his bed to produce a brochure]: I have this invitation from the Toronto, Star. . .

T&FN: Indoors! [Thinking of those Bible of the Sport

long legs on those tight curves.]

Juantorena: Maybe I will be there in February.

T&FN: You think you can run on the boards?

Juantorena: Mmm-hmm.

T&FN: Do you have different training schedules in preparing for the 800 and the 400?

Juantorena: I combine the training.

'I Was Afraid in The Olympics'

Training for the 400 meters helps the 800. And some resistance training in the 800 helps.

T&FN: Do you run much long distance in the fall?

Juantorena: No, no, not so much. The longest I run for the 400 is only 300 meters and a half.

T&FN: You never run cross country?

Juantorena: Not so much kilometers. I think I am the only 800 meter runner to have only 1000 kilometers in a year. Only.

T&FN: Only a thousand! You must run that many in races [large laughter all around].

Juantorena: The others run 3000 kilometers, 2 thousand and a half.

T&FN: Do you think you would lose your speed if you ran that far?

Juantorena: Mmm-m [noncommittal].

T&FN: When you first ran the 800, were you scared?

Juantorena: I was afraid in the Olympics because I was thinking that I had to have the power to run 3 times 800 and then try to get a medal.

T&FN: What has the result of your success in the Olympics been in Cuba?

Juantorena: There is now more attraction for track and field. You know, like the children all the time want to do what they think is most important. For example, when Stevenson won a medal, children was fighting in the street [at which he goes through a quick shadow-boxing routine]. Like Stevenson.

And now, all children are running in the streets. Everybody calls now [switching to a high-pitched falsetto]: "Juantorena, Juantorena."

[At this point, the phone rings for the third time during the interview.]

T&FN: Do you get many phone calls? Do people always want to talk to you?

Juantorena: Just journalists like you.

T&FN: Yah, journalists like us. No girls though, because you are married, no?

Juantorena: Yes, I have 2 kids. One of them is only 2 months.

T&FN: Have you seen him yet?

Juantorena: Yes, at the London

airport. The other one, my daughter, is 2 years and 10, almost 3 years.

T&FN: I think that many people in America would be surprised that you speak such good English.

Juantorena: English good?! No! I've never been in the schools for the English.

T&FN: How did you learn?

Juantorena: Casanas teach me.

Casanas [still buried to the eyes under the covers, and who speaks even better English]: Little bit.

T&FN [taking the bait]: Did he really? [then, catching the grins and winks the Cubans are exchanging] Oh, a joke.

Juantorena: A joke.

T&FN: Who was your idol when you were young?

Juantorena: My idol? Figuerola [world record holding sprinter].

T&FN: What did your wife do before you were married?

Juantorena: She was a student, she studied mathematics—computers. Now she is changing to physical education at Habana University.

T&FN: What will you do when you finish running?

Juantorena: I will go to work. In economics.

T&FN: You have to learn how to spend your money?

Juantorena [grinning broadly and making a dealing motion]: Count the money, count the money.

[At this point, a slight man enters the room and fires off a quick round of staccato Spanish and leaves as suddenly as he appeared.]

Gentlemen, the interview is over. Thank you. I must go for my massage.

■ ■ ■

As it turned out, we had been able to sneak almost 40 minutes of his time. But no, it wasn't enough to ask him about his plans for the 1500, tactics, his opponents, etc. We now have lots of good questions left for next time.

As a postscript, we take you to the practice track that evening. Don and I were discussing the state of the Earth with Britain's Dave Jenkins when we heard a commotion at the gate.

"NNO, NNO!" said the familiar voice of you-know-who. There was a young local forcing a pen and paper into Juantorena's chest. Totally incensed, he dashed the offending implements to the ground and stalked onto the infield. Within seconds, several more *kinder* flocked to his knees with photographers circling about to catch the image of this lone tree in the middle of a desert.

Muttering a few nasty words and waving his arms, Juantorena charged from the group and stomped off to be alone.

Moments later, he passed by the fence, hands on hips, scowl on face. As he passed us, he looked up, crooked one side of his mouth and gave a giant wink that only we could see.

Maybe we will get a next time. □