BOB COFFMAN
T&FN Interview by David Gleason

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of the three decathletes who ever scored 8000 points 4 times in one season, two are well-known Olympic champions—Bill Toomey, who bettered that mark 7 times in '69, and Bruce Jenner, who turned the trick 4 times in 1975.

The third is tall, 28-year-old Texan named Bob Coffman. A 13.9 hurdler for Southern Cal back in '72, Coffman turned to the decathlon in '73 and took 5th in the NCAA the following year with a PR of 7623. He has been a decathlete ever since.

The following 3 years did not show significant improvement, however, as Coffman completed 11 more 10-eventers but only managed a 27-point improvement over his NCAA mark.

But Coffman can be a rather single-minded individual. He began training with Tom Tellez (who came to Houston in '76) and finally started to catch fire with a 7992 score in December '77. He won 1978's USOC Sports Festival with 8137 (hand), but even that gave little indication of what was to come in '79.

This year began, ironically, with a Texas Relays loss to Tito Steiner, but Coffman has been unstoppable since, running up impressive wins at the AAU, the Pan-Am Games (where he avenged his loss to Steiner), and finally an outstanding 8274 PR at the U.S.-USSR-Canada tri in August.

His marks this season include world decathlon records for 100m (10.38) and the hurdles (13.91). Coffman has suddenly become one of the world's top decathletes.

Naturally, my first question to the rather intense, soft-spoken native of Houston dealt with his breakthrough after 10 years of endeavor.

T&FN: What has turned a consistent 7500-point decathlete into a consistent 8000-plus decathlete?

Coffman: I work with Coach Tellez here in Houston, and he and I have been working on consistency. We go over each event, over and over, doing drills hundreds of times. Lots of throws in the shot and discus, especially during the off-season. Not so much in the jumping events, because that takes too much out of your legs.

T&FN: How does that improve your performance?

Coffman: Well, when you make a mistake in competition, you can correct it then and there.

Coach Tellez has broken down each event into simple little steps; when I get into trouble during a meet, I can go back and find out what I'm doing wrong, and then do it right on the next throw or jump. He's given me a new point of view on the decathlon that way.

T&FN: This year you had victories at the AAU, the Pan-Am Games and the U.S.-USSR; all big wins, but it seems the Quebec City win against the Russians might have been something like a turning point.

Coffman: Yeah, that meet was a turning point. Winning the AAU was great, called flat. I got the throw over, but it would have been a PR by 12 feet.

I had some good PRs in the hurdles, the discus was a good PR, my total was a PR, and there are still an easy, easy 200-300 points I can pick up just with what I have now.

If I could put everything together and have a really good meet, I could have an 8700-point decathlon. But again, it's a matter of putting everything together at one time.

T&FN: Is it possible to put that many PRs together in one day?

Coffman: Sure, it's possible. The guy I beat by only 5 points at the AAU, John Crist—he got PRs in 8 of 10 events. He improved on some marks by wide margins, like 11 feet in the discus. It's just a matter of doing well, plus having a lot of luck.

It's nice to have PRs all the time, but you can't always do that. You've got to be, again, consistent. You can't count on a PR. I can't run 10.38 every time like I did at the AAU; but I ran 10.61 at San Juan, and 10.71 at Quebec City, and those are still good marks.

T&FN: Do you feel that decathletes are treated like the second-class citizens of track?

Coffman: Well, we have our own AAU governing body, and the Texas Relays still has the decathlon on Wednesday and Thursday.

You know, it's nice having the track all to yourself, lots of room and all—but you could tell Cleburne Price that he could have the decathlon during his meet on Saturday and Sunday, and the meet would only run about 30 minutes longer than it does now. [SIGHS] It would just be nice to have someone besides your wife and the officials there during a decathlon, that's all.

T&FN: So your wife goes to your meets?

Coffman: Oh, yeah, my wife Barbara is one of those people, you know, behind the scenes. I couldn't continue without her. She comes to all the meets and sits through my decathlons.

T&FN: That must give you a lot of support.

Coffman: It does. She's a violinist with the Houston Symphony, one of the Track & Field News...
always inviting you places. And that’s nice.
But the issue’s not through until after the Olympic Games next year. I’m trying to keep everything in that perspective.

And when I have people coming to me, some company, wanting to set something up for later, that’s fine; but I say wait until after next year. I'll do the Texas Relays, Olympic Trials, and hopefully the Olympic Games, but that's it.

T&FN: Are you looking forward to doing something else besides the decathlon?

Coffman: Oh, definitely. One thing we’re going to do—I don’t know how, but we're going to do it—is go snow skiing next year. I met my wife skiing in Sun Valley, Idaho.

I don’t think I'd break my leg, but I could twist an ankle and lose a couple of weeks training. So that’s one of the first things we’re going to do when this is all over. Take a vacation week in Zermatt, Switzerland for Christmas. We've been planning on that for about three years.

And I’m looking forward to getting into, well, whatever. I have my own ideas, but I’d rather not say.

But I’m not the kind of person who can sit behind a desk. I refuse to wear a tie. I'm not that kind of person; I just don’t like to do things like that.

T&FN: Any thoughts on what will happen at Moscow?

Coffman: Well, I've told people before, you really can’t say. For example, at the AAU this year, nobody in the United States, not even Frank Zarnowski, thought that John Cristod would score better than 4th or 5th place. Nobody but John, that is. He had a personal record by 400 points.

And you know, anybody can do that if they just happen to be hot one day. As for the Olympics, people do things there that they've never done before, and will never do again.

Everybody will be there, but anybody who has done well in the past, anybody who is over 8000 points going into the Games is going to be somebody to contend with.

I'm certainly not putting myself at the top of the list by any means. There are guys who I've outscored that I'll put ahead of myself, just to keep myself in line. Because anything could happen. Guido Kratscher could score 8900 points if he puts it all together. I'd just like to make the team, and then see what happens.

Bob Coffman was born February 17, 1951 in Houston, Texas. 6-3/203.

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