T&FN INTERVIEW

Bob Kennedy

by Jeff Hollobaugh

Last year, Bob Kennedy was bitterly disappointed when he failed to make the World Championships 5000 final just three weeks after running a PR 13:14.91 at Bislett.

Back to the drawing board, he trained longer and harder than ever before. By March his efforts had earned him a big win in the U.S. Cross Country Trials—and a stress reaction in his left shin. When his racing resumed in May, the results were good, highlighted by a mile PR of 3:56.21 at the Pre Classic, but then he only placed 4th in the USATF 1500. To outsiders, it looked like the end of an average season.

But Kennedy is average no more. The Hoosier alum is now a major factor in European races, and his latest sequence of times, 13:05.93-7:35.33 AR-13:02.93, makes him the fastest native-born American ever.

In a career marked by steady improvement every year, 1994 so far represents a quantum leap that has the matter-of-fact, business-like Kennedy sounding amazed himself. We caught up with him in late July, as he prepared for the second half of the Euro season:

T&FN: Everyone is calling what you've done in the last few weeks a breakthrough. Does it feel that way to you?

Kennedy: Oh yeah, a big breakthrough. Obviously physically, but especially mentally. The 13:02 felt like 13:14 physically. Just mentally I went with the pace a little bit further than I did when I was running 13:14.

T&FN: How do you celebrate and unwind after running a 13:02?

Kennedy: It's tough, because the race is over there at 10:30 at night. By the time you cool down, you shower, you eat, it's 1:00 a.m. You have trouble going to sleep and you've got to catch a flight at 6:00. It's hard.

T&FN: In Oslo you were going for the win, not the fast time?

Kennedy: That's right, yeah. I knew it was going to be fast. I was just going to try to compete and if I was in there at the end I was definitely going to run under 13:10. So 13:02 is actually a big bonus. I went through 3000m about a second slower than I did when I ran 13:05. I just came back a lot faster.

I'm happy with that race because I did compete. I wasn't paced, I wasn't worried about splits. I was just running with whomever was up there.

T&FN: In your big upcoming race in Zurich, say there's a pivotal moment when you have to decide between taking a loss in 12:58, or a win in 13:10. Which would you rather have?

Kennedy: A loss in 12:58 right now, at this point in my career. If I was already the AR holder I might go for the win instead. But I'm going to lay it on the line. That's the way I look at it right now. Who knows what I can run?

T&FN: Have you overcome any fear factor you might have had of the Africans?

Kennedy: Definitely, definitely. I'm the ninth fastest in history. That makes me one of the best ever. There's no reason for me to be afraid of them anymore.

T&FN: Say a bus hits you tomorrow, and you have to miss the rest of your races this year. Would you be happy with your season to this point? Would you call it a success?

Kennedy: Oh, you'd have to. If that happened there would always be the question of what I could have done. It's very possible for me to go under 13:00 this year if everything is right and if I continue to go the way I have been going. But you can't argue with 12 seconds off your PR in a year, especially when you're getting down that fast. It would definitely be a successful season.

T&FN: You did a lot more distance in training over the last winter, in order to compete at the top level. In retrospect, is your background perfect this year?

Kennedy: Not perfect because I was hurt all of March. I didn't run a step. But I think I'm getting there. What I need to do is different than what other people need to do. I'm starting to slowly figure out what it is my needs are.

T&FN: Joe Henderson wrote in Running Commentary that your injury...
might have been a blessing in disguise. Do you agree?

Kennedy: Well, no, I don’t. Being injured is never the best thing that can happen to you. It definitely told me something, I think. It told me about my training, that I was going a little too hard too early. To tell you the truth, I haven’t really had the time to sit down and think about

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what that means.

T&FN: Your long stride and your confidence remind us a bit of the Kenyans. Have you consciously modeled yourself after them?

Kennedy: No, not at all. The only thing they’ve really taught me is the way they run with their heads. They really lay it on the line and go for it—no holding back.

T&FN: Do you know what kind of power you’ve got under your hood or are you still testing your limits?

Kennedy: You’re always testing your limits. I think that lot of people get out of the sport when they’re done testing their limits because it’s not fun anymore. You’re always trying to see if you can go faster, if you have more there. That’s what it’s all about, really.

T&FN: What would you say is your strong suit as an athlete?

Kennedy: I ran 56-something for the last 400m when I ran 13:02. You know I’m going to run a 56 off of a 13:02 or a 14:00. I don’t get much faster than that, but I can still run that speed off a very fast tempo, if that means anything. My strength is my big strength.

And also now, the way I think and the way I believe in what I can do. I really believe in myself and I really believe that I can do some pretty amazing things.

T&FN: What do you need to work on?

Kennedy: I think I could refine my finishing speed. That would always be a bonus, because you definitely need that in the Olympics or World Championships.

I’d like to think that I don’t need to work on anything differently and can keep building on everything. I have had a steady progression over the last 4-5 years and I would hope that I continue that process of getting stronger and getting better. I’m not going to change any-

thing if it’s working.

T&FN: How have you changed from the Bob Kennedy that shocked the NCAA cross country as a frosh?

Kennedy: I won my first NCAA Cross Country Championship because I didn’t know that you weren’t supposed to win it as a frosh. It’s different now because I’m more experienced and I do things for a reason. I’m obviously stronger and all that. It’s more of a job now—an enjoyable job. But I know what I’m doing. I do things for a reason, whereas I was just doing things blindly back then.

T&FN: What would you call the biggest disappointment in your running career?

Kennedy: Eugene in ’91. I was defending NCAA champion at 1500 and I didn’t make the final. Looking back on it now it was a minor thing, but at the time, it was one of my first failures, I’ve always run well in big meets. And I didn’t at that point.

That really woke me up. I never take a race for granted anymore. At the time I thought it was bad. It was bad. I thought it was a beginning to an end. But I’ve gotten past that and I think I’m a better athlete because of it.

T&FN: Do you want it more now? Success?

Kennedy: Oh yes, I do, especially after the last few weeks. I definitely want it more now. Even last year, the dream of an Olympic medal was an outside hope. It wasn’t much of a reality. And now, I’m right there. I could do it. I could win it all. So could a lot of other people. Though, I feel like I belong now and that makes it much more exciting.

T&FN: With your success at 5000, has your debut at 10,000 gotten any closer?

Kennedy: I haven’t thought about it. I’m almost positive I’ll run a 10K on the track someday. It could be next year, it could be in four years. I’m not sure. But it will be someday.

T&FN: What advice would you have for American distance runners who want to succeed on the European circuit?

Kennedy: No. 1—in order to be great, you have to train hard. Most people have to train harder than they would ever dream of training. Most Americans don’t train hard enough. They don’t lay it on the line enough in practice.

No. 2—it’s not easy. It hurts nine of the 12 laps of the 5000m; it hurts bad. Even when you’re running well. You have to be ready to face that and go through it. Otherwise, you’re not going to do anything.

Mentally the races are so much tougher. It’s boom, the gun goes off, and you go at it. In the U.S. it’s not like that. The gun goes off, you relax, you go at it maybe the last mile.

T&FN: We’ve written about you as part of a trend of promising young American runners. But have you reached the point where you’re inde-

The Bible Of The Sport

KENNEDY IN A NUTSHElL

Robert Owen Kennedy, Jr. was born August 18, 1970, in Bloomington, Indiana, and is 6’01’46. Graduated from Westerville North HS in Westerville, Ohio, in ’88, and competed for Indiana ’89-92. Currently represents Nike International. Has been coached by Sam Bell for six years.

Prs (with position on all-time lists): 1500—3:38.32 (’91); Mile—3:56.21 (’94); 3000—7:25.33 AR (2, 2 A) ’94; 2M—8:28.05 (’94); 5000—13:02.93 (9.12 W, 2, 2 A) ’94.

Major Meets: 1500—5JUS Jr (’87); 5JUS Jr (’88); 1US Jr, 1PA Jr (’89); 1NCAA (’90); 1NC In, 2NCAAs (’91, ’92); 2NCAAs (92); 4USA.
3000—8INC In (’89); 3INC In (’90); 1INC In (’92); 2USA In.
4WIC (’93).
5000—2USA (’90); 3USA, 1WC (91); 2OT, 12OG (92); 2USA, 5WC (’93).
XC—1NCAA (88), 1NCAAs (90); 3NCAAs (90); 1NCAA (91); 1USA (92); 1US Trials (’94).

Progression (U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

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A classic!

The heroes and heroines of two-lap racing are chronicled in *Wizards Of The Middle Distances: A History Of The 800 Metres*, a masterful work by two of the sport's most respected observers. T&FN European editor, Roberto Quercetani, provided the prose—a history of the 800/880 from the 1860s through the 1992 Olympic season—and Nejat Koks compiled the stats, 70 pages worth of yearly and all-time lists, records progression, and the like. Here are the exploits, in words and numbers, of Lon Myers, Ted Meredith, Rudolf Harbig, Mal Whitfield, Peter Snell, Alberto Juantorena, Sebastian Coe, Madeline Manning, Tatyana Kazankina, Jarmila Kratochvilova, and all the other middle distance superstars down through the years. It's great reading . . . and a fascinating source of information for every fan. Order your copy today.


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