

# Bob Kennedy

by Jeff Hollobaugh

*Last year, Bob Kennedy was bitterly disappointed when he failed to make the World Championships 5000 final just 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 start 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 Zürich, 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



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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 by winning 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 yeah, 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. But 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-

pendent of any domestic trend?

**Kennedy:** I think so. I've got the confidence now that it really doesn't matter what anyone else is doing.

**T&FN:** Do you have any fear of a Trials 5000 race going out in 4:40 for the mile?

**Kennedy:** It won't.

**T&FN:** You'll take off if it's that slow?

**Kennedy:** Sure. I don't have to run 13:02. I can run 13:20 and that's taking off in a U.S. championship. I don't think there are that many people in the US who can run under 13:20.

I did it last year: I sacrificed the championship by really going hard in Eugene. Matt Giusto ran a great race and he beat me. But I'm willing to do that for two reasons: to make sure I get on the teams and not run 13:50 and get screwed; and also to raise the sights of other people. They're not going to be able to win a title by running 13:45 anymore.

**T&FN:** How do you feel about having to run in the heat of Sacramento in order to represent the U.S. in balmly Göteborg next year?

**Kennedy:** The site-selection committee for USATF doesn't do a very good job. I know there are a lot of factors. That should be one of the main factors: picking a site that's conducive to great performance around the board.

Of course, sprinters and distance runners want different things, but I don't think sprinters want 100-degree temperatures either. That's a little ridiculous. There needs to be a change. It needs to be more than politics. Athlete performance needs to come first and then fill in the blanks after that.

I'm going to run there. I have to be there, and I'll deal with it. But you would hope that

#### KENNEDY IN A NUTSHELL

Robert Owen Kennedy, Jr. was born August 18, 1970, in Bloomington, Indiana, and is 6-0/146. 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 list): 1500—3:38.32 ('91); Mile—3:56.21 ('94); 3000—7:35.33 AR (2, 2 A) ('94); 2M—8:28.05 ('94); 5000—13:02.93 (9, 12 W; 2, 2 A) ('94).

**Major Meets:** 1500—5)US Jr ('87); 5)US Jr ('88); 1)US Jr, 1)PA Jr ('89); 1)NCAA ('90); 1)NC In, 5h)NCAA ('91); 2)NCAA ('92); 4)USA.

3000—8)NC In ('89); 3)NC In ('90); 2)NC In ('92); 2)USA In, 4)WIC ('93).





5000—2)USA ('90); 3)USA, 12)WC ('91); 2)OT, 12)OG ('92); 2)US, 5h)WC ('93).

XC—1)NCAA ('88); 5)NCAA ('89); 3)NCAA ('90); 1)NCAA, 1)USA ('92); 1)US Trials ('94).

**Progression** (U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	1500	Mile	3000	5000
'87	16/17	3:53.29	4:10.48m	8:27.3	—
'88	17/18	3:47.69	4:05.17m	8:38.0	—
'89	18/19	3:43.16	4:03.63i	—	14:21.40
'90	19/20	3:38.89 (5)	4:00.99i	7:58.92	13:42.80 (4)
'91	20/21	<b>3:38.32</b>	3:58.11i	7:48.02 (4)	13:22.17 (1)
'92	21/22	3:39.10 (9)	4:02.22i	7:53.02	13:28.18 (2)
'93	22/23	3:40.60 (8)	3:56.71	7:44.93 (1)	13:14.91 (1)
'94	23/24	3:38.74	<b>3:56.21</b>	<b>7:35.33</b>	<b>13:02.93</b>



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in the future they would think a little bit more.

**T&FN:** Will you adjust your training for heat?

**Kennedy:** It's hot as hell in summer in Indiana. There are hotter places, but it's 90° and 85% humidity here. It doesn't get any hotter than this.

**T&FN:** Has the fact that your dad was a notable runner had any influence on your choice of the sport?

**Kennedy:** It's had somewhat of an effect. He never really pushed me into running. He didn't want to. I think he always hoped that I would run. He used to tell me that whatever I do, be the best at it. And tried to show me what that took. What kind of attitude. I think my parents did a good job instilling my grasp of things and what's important and what's not important.

**T&FN:** Did your dad have any comment for you when your best times surpassed his?

**Kennedy:** He didn't, but I reminded him of it, I'm sure.

**T&FN:** How did your parents react when you told them you ran 13:02?

**Kennedy:** They were very excited. Very, very excited. I really think they thought I would run under 13:10 this year, but 13:02 is kind of "oh gosh." They were expecting something like this sometime in the future, but right now, it was a bit of a surprise and a thrill.

**T&FN:** I take it coach Bell was also excited.

**Kennedy:** He's very happy. But he also has instilled this quality in me as well—I called him up and said I ran 13:05 in Lille. He said, "Great job, I know you're there." That was one sentence. The next sentence was, "And now, get your head ready to run under 13:00."

It's always, "Great job, we made progress, now let's go to the next step." I think that's a great way to keep someone going. Never rest on your laurels.

**T&FN:** What do you see as the most important key to your success?

**Kennedy:** I've just become a lot more confident in myself. I've been married for over a year now; I have stability. My wife is very supportive and making some sacrifices so that I can better myself as an athlete.

One important thing is that we haven't moved from Bloomington. I'm a real firm believer in if something's working, don't change it. People graduate from college and even though they're running well they move to altitude or somewhere else. I'm going to be in Bloomington as long as I possibly can—as long as things are working. I don't believe in changing things if I'm making progress.

I think that attitude has not only helped build stability into my training and racing, it's given me confidence because I believe that what I'm doing is right and I keep getting reinforced in that manner. So I just get more and more confident. □