

Bob Kennedy

by Sieg
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VICTOR SAILER/PHOTO RUN

Watch out, Mark Nenow, your 27:20.56 American Record for 10K may not be long for this world. Not if Bob Kennedy—fully recovered from the back injury that helped relegate him to 6th in the Olympic Trials 5000—has his way.

Kennedy—already the American Record holder in the 3000 and 5000 and an eight-time No. 1 U.S. Ranker at the latter—says he has rebounded from disappointment so acute he couldn't watch Olympic track on TV. He has a renewed sense of purpose

and an eye on the 25-lap AR.

Now 30 and married for the past 8 years to wife Melina—an attorney and deputy mayor of Indianapolis, where the couple lives—Kennedy trots the globe to places like Melbourne and Palo Alto to train with fellow runners, including Sydney 1500 champ Noah Ngeny, who belong to the management group of British coach/agent Kim McDonald.

He is pleased to have just inked his third straight four-year sponsorship contract with Nike. (Nenow works for Nike, a connection that will soften the

blow should his record fall).

This winter T&FN found Kennedy mini-camped in Gainesville, Florida, with steeplechaser Pascal Dobert. The pair were in town preparing for indoor and cross country races ahead as house guests of Marty Liquori, himself a three-time U.S. No. 1 in the 5000 back in the '70s.

T&FN: Let's cover the bad news first. You were star-crossed in the 2000 Olympic year.

Kennedy: Last year is kind of a blur, in a sense, but my buildup for the spring was coming OK, and then in early May I was hit from behind in a car. I really didn't think anything of it until 6 days later; I couldn't run, my back felt so bad.

I had a bruised and swollen vertebra. Partially it was an SI [sacroiliac] joint that wasn't moving freely, but part of it was that I just had this swelling in my bone down there and there was literally nothing I could do treatment-wise except let it heal.

I for all intents and purposes missed 6 weeks from then on out, kind of missed 3½ weeks, came back a little too quick, missed another 2½ weeks, and then was really training for 4 weeks before the Trials.

T&FN: Not a lot of time. How did you approach the Trials 5000, given that you were not fully prepared?

Kennedy: Obviously in hindsight, it didn't work out. I might have tried something differently. But my thought process was I really thought I was in 13:25 shape, and historically when you put the pressure on American distance runners early, they give up and run for 2nd and 3rd. And I was hoping that this was going to be the same case.

But—bad for me and good for American distance running—that wasn't the case last year. It probably isn't the case any longer. Not with this group of runners. So you have to be ready.

I would have had the same type of approach if I had to do it over. I might have tweaked it a bit—instead of being out in 4:11, being out

in 4:16 or something, a little bit more even—but other than that, I knew I wasn't going to go [to the Olympics] in a 13:45 race. I really had no chance at that point, but if I ran 13:25, I had a chance.

T&FN: Did you think about running the 10,000 for 2000?

Kennedy: That was my plan all along, until the car accident really. As that all sorted itself out, I had to weigh my options. Really, I didn't think I had enough time before the Trials—and

the Olympics if I did make the team—to properly prepare for 10,000.

T&FN: *Were you back up to full mileage but the workouts weren't there yet?*

Kennedy: Well, it's kind of a balancing act when you're that close to the meet. I could have gone up and run, but then I was trying to balance quality sessions with a reasonable amount of mileage. I was probably running 75–80M/week for a couple of the weeks, with three track sessions. The difference was when I did the track sessions, I might have done them in times that were OK, but I wasn't in control, so I was pressing, pressing, pressing. When you're ready to go, you're really in control of everything.

T&FN: *In retrospect, do you think if you had run the 10K at the Trials, things might have gone any differently?*

Kennedy: It's hard to say, really hard to say. If I went back, I'm sure there are a lot of things I would do differently and a lot of things I wouldn't change a bit. But I try to put that behind me and move on. Certainly, the one way I'm able to do that is knowing in my mind that that car accident was something completely beyond my control.

T&FN: *What were the circumstances of the car accident?*

Kennedy: I was about 300m from my house in Indianapolis on a two-lane street heading

home. I was stopped behind a car that was turning left across traffic. We were dead stopped, and all of a sudden I heard screeching, and I was looking around, thinking, What the heck is that? Not a second later, I got slammed into the back by a 16-year-old kid. And he was probably doing about 50mph when he hit me, so it was pretty hard. His car was demolished and I had about \$6000 worth of damage to my Ford Explorer, and that was it.

I actually was going to be doing a track session that day. I postponed it and I actually did it the next day. Then I flew back to Palo Alto on like Thursday, and on Sunday during our long run it just hit me hard and that was it.

T&FN: *What were your emotions in the aftermath of finishing 6th?*

Kennedy: Backing up a bit, that whole process from the middle of May to the Trials was so tough for me, and I almost just bagged it twice, and said to my wife, "I'm coming home; it's not worth it."

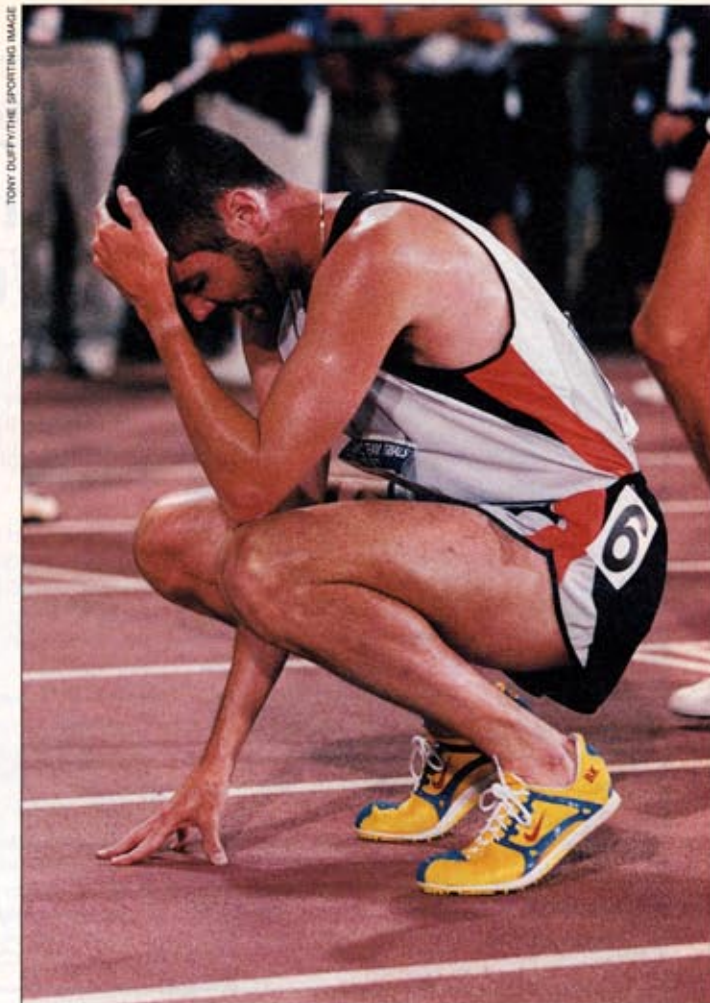
And she kept saying, "Look, just give your best shot no matter what happens because if you don't give your best shot, you'll regret it later."

Certainly, I'm so thankful to her for just keeping me going, because if I didn't give it a shot, I'd be kicking myself now. Even though I failed at what I was trying to do, I'm happy that I was out there and not giving up. So that was one positive.

Immediately after [missing the team], even though I knew it was a good possibility that was going to happen, it was still a bit of a shock because I literally have never failed to make a major championships team that I have tried to make since 1989 when I made a Junior Pan-Am team.

This was the first one that I missed, so it was unknown territory. It was shock and sadness, and I don't know, a whole bunch of mixed emotions. Anger and wondering, Is this it? Is it over? And just not knowing what the future was going to hold.

I ended up taking 7 weeks with no running at all just to completely let the back heal. After the 7 weeks I just knew in my heart and my head I have my best running in front of me. They say things



Kennedy's single-race Olympic season—6th in the Trials 5000—was both short and disappointing.

happen for a reason, and I just feel a new sense of energy right now. I feel better now and I feel like I have a better sense of direction than I've had in the last couple of years.

I'm pretty excited about this season. If I can stay healthy—which I'm the healthiest now that I've been, knock on wood—that's half the battle right there. Especially when you're 30 years old, which isn't old but is certainly on the downside of the curve for distance running.

T&FN: *What did you do during that 7-week layoff?*

Kennedy: I was home. It was interesting. My wife and I were saying that it's literally the first time since 1989 that I've been home during the month of August. I haven't seen an August in the U.S. in 11 years. It was kind of fun to just be normal, for a little bit anyway.

T&FN: *You ran 27:38.37 in your first serious outing at 10K in '99. Do you wish now you had struck while the iron was hot and run it at the World Championships that year?*

Kennedy: Well, I'll tell you that at the end of the year. If I go do the things I expect to do this year, then I would say no. If I never get to that level again, then maybe yes. But like I said, focus on the things we can control. That's out of my control at this point.

T&FN: *What are your plans for the 10,000 this year?*

Kennedy: Right now, off the top of my

Kennedy's Advice To Webb

A 4:05.17 prep miler himself, Kennedy was with Marty Liquori—for decades the last high schooler to run sub-4:00—when news of Alan Webb's breakthrough came.

T&FN: *Did you and Marty have any discussion after Webb's sub-4:00 the other night?*

Kennedy: Briefly but nothing of substance. I know Marty actually talked to Alan's coach and was supposed to talk to Alan.

But that was certainly an impressive race, and hopefully will open the floodgates again. I think this is a great crop of high school runners that can hopefully do some great things on the international level in the future.

T&FN: *Do you have any advice for Webb, Dathan Ritzenhein, Ryan Hall and the rest of them? You've competed through a revolutionary time in world distance running. The competition has never been tougher.*

Kennedy: My advice is and always has been, "Stay the course; focus on what you can control, and take it a step at a time."

If you're Alan Webb right now or Ritzenhein, and you're thinking, "OK, what do I have to do right now to win an Olympic gold medal?" well, that's great. I mean you should be thinking that in the back of your mind, but let's address the immediate future.

Let's accomplish that goal, and then let's readjust and move to the next one. Because it can be overwhelming if you start thinking about records and fast times and medals and contracts and all that stuff right now. Just step by step. That's the only way to get there, I think.

Kennedy Interview

head, I would think Stanford in May, the same one I ran two years ago—because I have no standards because I basically didn't race last year. And then I would run nationals and the World Championships.

T&FN: *With two of those being championships, would you then go after the American Record in the May race?*

Kennedy: I think that would be something I'd know about the middle of April. The No. 1 goal would be to run under the 28:10 [Worlds] standard and then we'll go from there, depending on where I think I am.

T&FN: *Do you have any general observations about championship racing versus paced European circuit racing?*

Kennedy: I think that there's a line that I'm still learning in that you prepare differently for both of them and the challenge is finding the mix that prepares you as well as you can for both.

Bottom line is the European races are time trials; you just go out and run as hard as you can and see who's standing last. And certainly the championship races are more tactical. Even when they're fast championship races there are big changes of pace, meaning that if you run 13:00 in a championship race, you don't run even splits. You really come home the last four laps fast, 4:02–4:03.

T&FN: *Sounds like you're describing the '99 World Championships 5000.*

Kennedy: Yeah, yeah. I've seen everything. I saw Ismael Kirui win in '95 by subtly changing the tempo every 200m. He would just run 33-31, 33-31, 33-31—and it's not that big of a deal, but if you haven't prepared for that, it's very difficult over time. And he didn't drop anybody in a sense, but he was able to outsprint them because he just took the leg speed out of them.

And sometimes if you're not aware, you don't even know that's going on. There's just so much involved that you have to, No. 1, prepare for it and then be aware of it when it's actually happening.

T&FN: *Much has been made of Adam Goucher challenging you as the top American. Any thoughts on that rivalry?*

Kennedy: I think it's good. I think it's good to have a rivalry in this country. For two things: one, to raise interest in the sport a bit, and two, to raise the bar and the level of accomplishments for the other guys behind us, and runners coming out of high school hopefully.

Adam is new on the scene. He's fresh and he's the guy that people talk about maybe more now. He certainly has potential. But if you want me to be cocky, I will. He hasn't done anything close to what I've done in the past yet. And I hope he does, but he hasn't yet. So we'll see what happens in the next three or four years, I guess.

T&FN: *You are still looking ahead. But what accomplishments are you most proud of to this point?*

Kennedy: A couple of things. I've been able to compete at a high level consistently for a number of years—not just one or two. And the records; I'm very proud that up until now no American has ever run faster than I have at 3000 and 5000m.

That means something to me, although I know that records are made to be broken and they will be broken at some point.

And I think the other thing, I feel like in Atlanta—even though there was no medal and I know with the American public if you don't win a medal, you fail in a sense—I just felt like I gave myself the best shot of winning that medal. I'm proud of myself for that.

T&FN: *People who know the sport would agree with you on that.*

Kennedy: Yeah, people that know the sport—which is a small amount of people. But I've always done things, I think, with the sense that am I going to be able to sit on my couch in 10 years and be content with myself?

And I think I have done things in a manner that when I do retire and I'm sitting there that I can say, "Look, you got everything out of it that you could."

That's my ultimate goal in running: to be able in 10 years to say, "You ran as well as you possibly could run."

If that's no faster than I've run up to this point or a lot faster, or medals or no medals, there's nothing I can do about it as long as I got everything out of myself that I have. That's the only way to stay sane, I think. □



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