

DALEY THOMPSON

by Jon Hendershott

Many observers have called Daley Thompson the decathlon's—and maybe track's—hero of the future. But the immense talent of the talkative young Briton clearly indicates that tomorrow may already be here.

Only 20 (7/30/58), Thompson burst upon the track world in 1976 with a 14th at Montreal and a World Junior Record 7905 shortly after.

He was even better in '77: Junior records of 7921 and 8124, 8190 and the European Junior title. The ascension continued ever higher last year with more bests—8238 and 8289 (good for the European silver), plus his most-publicized effort so far, an 8463 accumulation for the Commonwealth gold that included a wind-aided 26-7/8.

As much renown as Thompson has gained from his athletic exploits, he has also gained a reputation as one voluble, quotable athlete. Talk to him for even a short while, though, and you gather that a straightforward approach has been Daley's path since his youth in London's sometimes racially-troubled Notting Hill district.

The son of a Nigerian father and Scottish mother, Thompson knew deprivation as a child, but his athletic ability has opened the world to him—and instilled tough, uncompromising expectations of himself. Add to that a frankness not born of arrogance, but of simple honesty, and you begin to see the glibness of Thompson which the press fed upon last summer as merely a man speaking his mind—even if sometimes facetiously.

Thompson spent several weeks in San Diego this spring, training hard for those important competitions in the coming seasons—even if he does initially make light of his visit:

Thompson: If I were still at home, I'd be hiding from the weather. It's still pretty cold, in the 30s with snow on the ground. So I may as well come over here, lay on the beach and train maybe once a week or so—if I can fit it into my busy schedule. Wouldn't want to strain m'self, you know. Get enough of that in the decathlon.

T&FN: How and why did you get into the decathlon?

Thompson: I started athletics when I was about 14; I started doing a little bit of running. I joined an athletics club and sort of did the long jump and 100 and 400 and a little high jump. My coach, Bob Mortimer, who is still my coach now, thought it might be good for me to try the decathlon.

T&FN: Had you ever heard of it up to that time?

Thompson: Nope, not a bit—in fact,



I'm still wishing I hadn't. I've been going downhill ever since.

T&FN: Was there a moment when you "became" a decathlete, when you realized there was something there?

Thompson: Well, after my first decathlon [6685 in 1975] I know I thought, "This is for me. This is the thing I can excel in most."

T&FN: What do you feel is the greatest challenge of the decathlon?

Thompson: I think the decathlon itself, really. Not one separate thing. You have to try to put 10 different things into making the one whole thing and try to do it well. That to me is the greatest challenge of the decathlon: doing the 10 things in the best possible way you can. You might get 3 really good events or even 5 or 6, but the chances of you getting all 10 really good are not too high, so that's what you strive for.

T&FN: You responded once to someone's statement that a decathlete is just a mediocre athlete who can't really do anything well...

Thompson: Yeah, that was some drunk journalist who only went to athletics meetings once a year and who never competed himself.

T&FN: You responded that a

decathlete is the master of one event, the entire decathlon.

Thompson: The decathlon is made up of 10 things, just like a triple jump is made up of a hop, a step and a jump. You cannot be a great decathlete by being good at only 5 or 6 events.

The top half-dozen decathletes in the world could make the British team in several events, myself included. The decathlon isn't the easy way out anymore. Maybe a decade ago or so, it was the easy option to drop out of the high jump, or hurdles, or pole vault and do decathlon and become an international. But when you get into the top flight these days, it's no longer easy.

T&FN: You are so talented that you could be world-class in several decathlon events if you concentrated on them—the long jump, 400, vault.

Thompson: But I don't think I could get the same fulfillment as a person. I do feel the decathlon is for me. If I worked on it, I could maybe get up among the best long jumpers, but I feel the decathlon can give a lot more personal satisfaction because I can get to the very top in it. I doubt very much I could ever jump 29-2½, but I know I can score 8617—and more.

T&FN: Would you say you apply this same kind of determination and striving for perfection to all facets of your life?

Thompson: No, not at the moment because right now my life is quite sheltered and tunneled. I do very little else besides decathlon. I don't go out much; I'm a bit like Bruce Jenner in that I sort of eat, sleep and drink decathlon.

I feel that's the only way you can ever get everything out of yourself and the decathlon is by putting everything into it. I put in as many hours as I can and do what needs to be done.

T&FN: A "full-time" approach?

Thompson: Yeah, it has to be. There's no real way to attempt to achieve the perfection you seek without putting everything into it.

T&FN: You have been quoted that you try to consider yourself the most confident man in the world and that applies both to the decathlon and as a person in general. That is certainly necessary, but might it be masking