

## 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,



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

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?

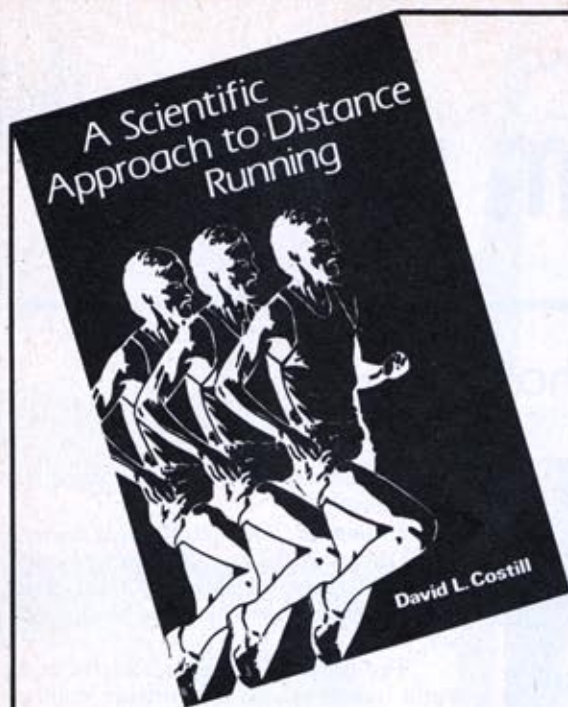
**Thompson:** I think the decathlon itself, really. Not one separate thing. You have to try to put 10 different things into making the one whole thing and try to do it well. That to me is the greatest challenge of the decathlon: doing the 10 things in the best possible way you can. You might get 3 really 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





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something like a need to prove yourself to yourself?

**Thompson:** Really, that's what me and the decathlon are all about, proving myself to myself, that I can do it. I have very high expectations of myself.

Like when I was younger, I felt I was always having to prove myself to other people. Having to show off in front of others, that sort of thing. Now my competitive urges are much better channeled and the only thing I have to do these days is prove to myself that I can do things.

But there are also times when you need to be outward, especially doing decathlon. You need recognition, especially in something big like the Commonwealth Games when you have guys like Henry Rono in there. It's only fair that we should get some kind of recognition.

**T&FN:** Well, a Jenner-like performance in Moscow could open many doors, both financially and career-wise.

**Thompson:** Certainly, but I'll only be 21 and nowhere near my peak physically. So hopefully I'll go on at least until '84. Then after winning it twice, you know, things might get a little too much for me and I might want to pack up.

Some fellow may want to give me 2½ million reasons not to continue, but hopefully I'll be strong enough in my will to want to prove to myself that I can go on and achieve even greater results. Once money, or anything else, starts taking control of you and governing what you enjoy and want to achieve, then perhaps it is time to pack up—or at least reassess your goals.

But I feel a realistic goal for me is 2 Olympic gold medals—maybe even 3. I'd only be 29 at the next one. Look at Avilov. Boy, I'd be a real pain in the ass then, wouldn't I!

**T&FN:** Is it possible that your background—coming from a tough, racially-mixed neighborhood in London—has had any effect on your desire to compete or this striving for excellence?

**Thompson:** I'm not actually sure. I'm half-caste myself, y'know. But when I was a youngster I was taken out of the environment and sent to a boarding school. So maybe that's why I haven't, as a friend of mine says, a "ghetto" complex—a friend of mine named Steve Ovett.

**T&FN:** Oh yes, he's the one who said the decathlon is 9 easy events and 1 that none of you can do.

**Thompson:** Well, actually, I made up that quote and gave it to him. He's not that clever.

**T&FN:** Well, after you made the big headlines at Edmonton—really became box office so to speak—did you get many pressures to become a kind of example for young black youth in Britain?

**Thompson:** Yes, I did. There are a lot of boards of racial equality and things like that and they were always ringing me up wanting me to appear here or speak

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there. But I was always busy. It's just impossible to get involved in that kind of stuff.

Again, it's impossible to climb two mountains at once and I'm trying to fulfill my own goals. Obviously, I'd like to help a lot of kids, black or white, but I'll be able to do a lot more once I've fulfilled my own ambitions.

I don't think people understand. They think that once you're famous, you're famous and you've done all of what you wanted to do. That's not the case. I feel I'm just starting.

But people don't understand the pressures and all the things directed toward young athletes when they start making it and how easy it is for them to slide off the rails.

**T&FN:** Well, you were incredibly successful very quickly, competing in the Olympics in the 6th decathlon of your life. Was that sudden success hard to handle?

**Thompson:** Well, not really, because as I said I have high expectations of myself and I fully expected I would go to the Games. And it was just so great to be there around athletes that 9 months before or so I had only been reading about. I wasn't overawed by it; it was just nice to be there. Meeting all sorts of people, Juantorena and the like. It was like Disneyland and Mickey Mouse.

It's the kind of thing that you can't let get to you. It's just another decathlon, I'm going to try my best, meet people, learn from it. It was a very important step for me. It put me on the firing line, as it were.

**T&FN:** The daily press has used such phrases to describe you as a "fast talker, lady killer, brash, boastful, introspective"...

**Thompson:** What's that, what does "introspective" mean?

**T&FN:** Hmm, quiet, reflective, keeps to himself. How much of that describes the "real" Daley Thompson?

**Thompson:** I think a little of everything. At different times, you have to be different people. You obviously have to play up to whatever you need at the time, I suppose.

I like that "introspective." Actually, when I'm training at home and away from all the razzmatazz as it were, I'm pretty much a normal guy and I just get on with what I do—which is training.

**T&FN:** I was going to ask how the "civilian" Daley compares to the "athlete" Daley, but it sounds like the athlete dominates almost totally.

**Thompson:** Yeah, the athlete is total at the moment. When I'm at home, I may get up about 10:30, go run, but then I'm not back inside again until between 7:30 and 9. Then I spend a little time falling asleep in front of the telly and then to bed.

I love our British comedies, *Monty Python* and *The Two Ronnies* and a new one called *Faulty Towers*, by one of the guys from *Monty Python*. They are all

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really funny.

*T&FN:* In 25 words or less, as we say over here, what do you think of this immense talent you have?

*Thompson:* I think it has a long way to go yet. I only hope that, for my own personal satisfaction, I can get at least somewhere near the bottom of it. I feel I have a lot to offer, to put the decathlon on the map as Bruce did a few years ago. But continue to put it on more than just the one thing.

I want to give back to the decathlon because it has given me so much. I can never complain. I feel I actually owe the sport a lot. It's put me in the spotlight. I mean people ring me for interviews. In Europe, I'm on the telly. You know, silly things but they mean a lot to a person.

I've met a lot of people like Elton John and Rod Stewart. I asked Elton John for his autograph and he knew who I was. I was shocked; you could have knocked me over with a feather.

So the sport has given me a lot and I want to put back into it in any way I can. Help in any way possible; get more people into athletics.

*T&FN:* The first day of the Commonwealth was one of those storybook days when you seemed to do everything right. Is that hard to follow up on the second day?

*Thompson:* Well, it just depends on how you feel. Actually, my last 3 events on the first day weren't as good as I wanted. Then I had a couple of so-so ones the second day, so it is really hard to follow up, especially if the first day is your best. For someone like me, the first day is always the hardest because I'm under pressure to get a good lead. But I'm working on the second day, so hopefully I won't be under as much pressure.

I think the toughest thing is holding it all together mentally. You'll be ready physically, but to actually keep it going in your head—when to push yourself, when to relax—that's what's tough.

The European was a very important learning experience; you know, never assume you have it won. I had a good lead the first day and I thought I had it, especially after Kratschmer went out. But I almost fell in the hurdles. Then my first discus throw was a personal best so I was back up again. Then things fell apart again in the vault. But it was important to learn that. It was probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

Experience has a lot to do with decathlon, especially in things like knowing where you are, what you're doing at the time; things that you acquire over time. That's why discus and javelin throwers reach their best when they're 28 or 29.

*T&FN:* Just like you when you're hanging around for the 3rd gold, right?

*Thompson:* Yeah, I'm going to be good. I won't be playing around with the boys anymore. Hey, when I grow up, I'm going to be hot. □

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