

DON PAIGE

by Jon
Hendershott

On first glance, Don Paige might come across as a smiling, happy-go-lucky college kid, a clean-cut, well-scrubbed, "All-American" type.

He certainly is all of that, and more: articulate and intelligent, an introspective man who answers questions in the same orderly fashion in which he conducts his life.

If this could describe the Dr. Jekyll side of the tall, lean Villanova junior, then once he steps on the track to race—at any distance, in any level of competition—we are treated to the Mr. Hyde half of this remarkably talented runner.

He runs in a loose-yet-powerful stride, carefully controlling the intensity which lurks just below the surface of that bright, cheery exterior. But Don Paige keeps that strong competitive streak of his where he wants and needs it, on the track.

And this year, it has served him well, starting back in February when he set an indoor American Record for 1000m and culminating in his big NCAA double, the first in more than two decades. And he followed that with a 1:45.6 800 PR a week later in the Berkeley Brooks meet.

While running is not the all-consuming passion of the lanky (6-0/150) 22-year-old (10/13/56) native of Baldwinsville, N.Y. (near Syracuse), when Don Paige races he gives his entire being to the pursuit of victory. At Champaign, victory could never outrun him.

T&FN: Did you have any particular reaction when you found out that the last man to win the 880/mile double at the NCAA was Ron Delany of Villanova?

Paige: No, I didn't know who had won it last. When I found out, I thought, "Wow, he was an Olympic champion. It must be a tough double. Well, at least he was from Villanova." But I also know that not very many people have even tried it.

T&FN: When was the decision made that you would take your shot at it?

Paige: The night before the declarations had to be made. You had to confirm entries by 9 a.m. on Wednesday and we called Mr. Elliott Tuesday night. I figured, "If he wants me to double, I want to hear it from him. I want him to tell me he thinks I can do it."

I wanted him to fortify my determination. He just said, "Go ahead and try it. If you win, the glory is all yours. If you lose, I'll get the blame. Just try to do your best."

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T&FN: That attitude seems to take the pressure off the athlete. Is that the kind of approach he takes to things?

Paige: He takes a very basic approach. He doesn't do it for glory for himself, but just to try to better the individual. And not just athletically, but in every way, for the human being.

He tries to develop you as a whole person, not just as an athlete. At a lot of schools, you're there on that scholarship; you're there for nothing but track. But he doesn't want us to waste the educational opportunity we have.

He feels there is enough pressure on you and he doesn't want to put on more as the coach. That's a good aspect of him.

T&FN: It was probably a good psychological move of his not to let you know until the very end that you would double. But after you knew, what did you think of attempting it at that level of competition?

Paige: I talked to my teammate Tony Tufariello beforehand and just jokingly said, "I really wonder if he will want me to run the double?" and Tony said, "Hey, Don, he probably will because you're in great shape." He kept trying to boost up my confidence, too, because he could tell I was leery; I wasn't sure.

And that was it: I wasn't sure. Of what kind of shape I was in, how well I would do, how people would react. Here I was with a whole contingent of family and relatives and my girlfriend there. I kept thinking, "What will they think if I bomb out in the 800?" But I told myself it would be no disgrace after coming back from the 1500, after winning one; plus it would be my fifth race of the meet and I would really have nothing to lose and if I did well it would show that much more for me.

T&FN: How did you feel about the competition, your times, the way the races were run?

Paige: I didn't know exactly who would be in the 1500. Like I didn't know Sydney Maree wasn't in it until that Tuesday I called Mr. Elliott. Then Nyambui went in the long double and Rudy Chapa decided not to run it and Thom Hunt wasn't running it. That gave me more confidence because there would be less

mental pressure.

I was very sore for the 1500 final because I didn't think we would run as fast as 1:48.2 in the 800 heats. My last lap in the 1500 was 53.7?! Hmm, it didn't seem that fast at all. [Laughs] I'm glad I knew that well after the races or I might have been even more tired.

After the 1500, I wasn't as tired or winded as I thought I would be. Your adrenaline is still flowing after winning a big race like that. I just lay down and tried to rest. A few people came over and said things to me, but they could tell I wasn't in a talkative mood.

But my mind was very clear. I didn't think of anything. Well... once I did look up at the sky and I thought, "I wish it would open up and rain buckets." It would have been a surprise, a shock, to the other guys, but it wouldn't have bothered me.

T&FN: You said earlier this year that you were pleased with your '78 season because it was your first full outdoor season after those stress fractures as a freshman and sophomore. You felt you were still learning to run the 1500.

Paige: I've learned how to train differently and a lot of that came from the '78 season. Going to the NCs, getting 4th, then going to Europe and running very poorly. I found my strength was absolutely zero and I realized I hadn't trained properly at all.

Also just your basic maturity plays a major role. Your natural maturity every year helps.

T&FN: What else has made the difference between Don Paige '78 and Don Paige '79?

Paige: I haven't really changed; I'm still the same Don Paige who hangs around with the same guys. When some people find a higher plateau on the running level, they might get a big head and get carried away and lose some friends. But I'm still just me.

As far as moving up to world class, I don't think I am world class yet. I've run 1:45.6, which is getting close, but I'm not really established yet.

T&FN: Do you feel it hurt you to lose those two seasons to stress fractures or might that have kept you from developing too early?

Paige: I'm not sure what I think of it yet; maybe it will take me a few more years to put it all in perspective. But you can look at it a couple of ways: I did lose two valuable years of mileage and training on the roads, which affects strength. A runner just doesn't go out and start running 100 miles a week. I still have trouble with that right now. It takes years before you can start training at that real world-class level.

Or, you can look at it like you said: "I lost those training years, but I should run better in the next few years because I'll be older and more mature."

T&FN: *You were saying that you still have the same friends and that you haven't changed. It sounds like you keep your sport distinct from the rest of your life. But what place does running play in your overall life?*

Paige: Some people make running their whole life. I do things around running but it isn't my whole life. Some people just won't even go out and have a good time. In college, Marty Liquori wouldn't go to a party because he was afraid he would lose valuable sleep. It might slow him down in a workout and someone over in Europe would have done that exact workout and Marty might lose by an inch.

I try to mix things, but I do revolve most everything now around my running, especially this year and next. But I still try to include that exterior part of my life, because everyone needs that.

Mr. Elliott doesn't want you to be just a runner. He really stresses that; he always says it will help you more to be an all-around person and not just an athlete. A better frame of mind, a better outlook on life.

Like I love to play tennis. I haven't had much chance lately, but in the summer I play a lot. Also golf. And I love to water ski—although I'm sure the coaches would have heart attacks if they saw some of the spills I've taken trying to be a hot dog.

And I like movies. They're relaxing. I like anything by Mel Brooks. Usually we will go to whatever big ones are playing—*Superman*, *Manhattan* by Woody Allen, shows like that.

T&FN: *For some people, running can be an obsession.*

Paige: Mr. Elliott says that only so much of a race is physical; the rest is mental. A lot of good college athletes simply overwork. They train wrong and that might be why they don't run as well as they should. They're trained physically, but they aren't sharp mentally.

T&FN: *Has the great Villanova tradition in the middle distances affected your motivation?*

Paige: It did early. I remember going into my first indoor meet as a freshman, wearing Villanova sweats, and it seemed everyone stopped and watched us. Other athletes stopped jogging to look at us. I asked Tiny Kane what was going on and he said, "You just watch. Everyone watches Villanova." It was a queer feeling, but *Bible of the Sport*



Bill Killian

Paige drives to the 800 title ahead of (l-r) McIntosh, Terer, Futrell, Omwansa.

when you're on the line, you realize that now you're wearing that same singlet that the Delanys, Patricks, Liquoris, Coghlan, all the great ones wore. Maybe it's the uniform that makes you run fast!

That history gives you an added uplift, but that wears off very quickly. You hit reality pretty fast. But that history does strengthen your confidence. Maybe you've just finished a workout Mr. Elliott gave you, say 10 quarters in 61 with a 220 jog—and we really jog, we don't walk.

You finish it and he says, "Okay, you guys are done." I'm sure some guys at other schools might be skeptical: "Should I have done more? Should I have done them harder or faster?" Or if the coach is going in, the guy might think, "Maybe I should do another one." They're skeptical; they don't know if they should do more.

When I'm finished with a workout, I feel, "Ah, good, I did what Mr. Elliott told me and I'm feeling great and that's enough." I know it's enough. He has trained so many great athletes and been around so long and seen so much that anyone would be crazy not to listen to him.

T&FN: *Particularly after the NCAA, there were many references in the press to you as "America's next great miler." What is your reaction to that?*

Paige: I think that is very unfair to someone like Steve Scott. How can they take that away from Steve? He has been the best American miler for 2 years. He has dominated the field, so how can they take that away from him without us having even

run against each other yet?

I feel good when people say that; it gives me a boost. But they're not looking at the truth. Maybe they're hoping I'll become the next top miler, but Steve ran 3:53.0 last year and had the five fastest miles by Americans. Plus he's very experienced.

T&FN: *Something else that has been written about you this year is something like "the lanky Jim Ryun lookalike." What do you think of that?*

Paige: I can't say I don't like being compared to him because he was a phenomenal athlete, running the times he did when he did. At least I can say that when people have compared me to Ryun, I haven't lost my identity. They don't say, "There goes Jim Ryun"; they say, "There's Don Paige, who looks like Jim Ryun."

T&FN: *You said last winter that you felt the puzzle to be fit together in running the 1500 was combining strength with speed. Now that you have run 1:45.6, do you feel you have improved both?*

Paige: I feel that the quality of speed that my legs have has stayed about the same over the past 2 years. I did speed work in the winter, so then outdoors I could work on my endurance strength. It feels awkward to me when we go out in 52-point, like at Berkeley, because I know I don't have basic speed that many other guys have. But my 1:45.6 came from my basic strength, so it hasn't really hurt me.

T&FN: *One of the most notable features of your running is the change of gears you make. Have you always been able*

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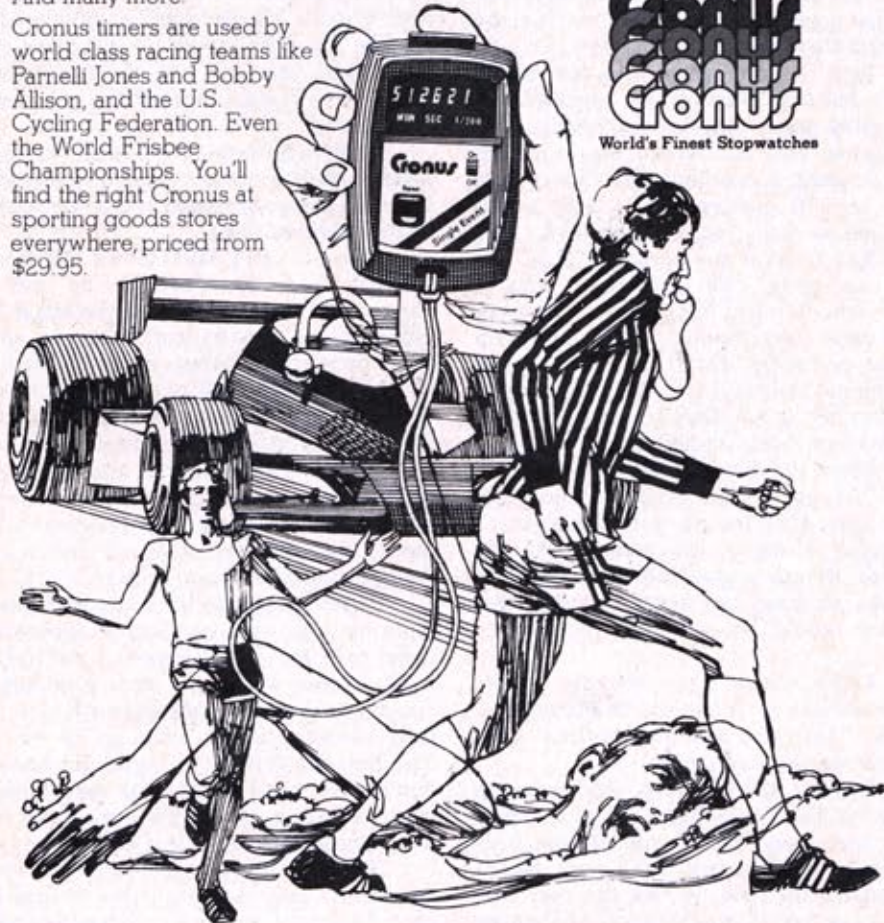


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to do that?

Paige: Always, from my freshman year in high school. I've always been a wait-and-kicker—and in high school I was really bad. I would come from waay back.

I don't lag back as much as I used to. You can't in this level of competition. Many of the guys now have good kicks, plus they're stronger.

T&FN: *Can you really say what it is in you that makes you want to run, and win, so hard?*

Paige: People talk about having a "killer instinct," but I don't feel I have that at all. I look at it that I got up every morning for the past few months for my run, I trained very hard, I've been trying to keep everything aimed toward my training. I go into a race and I don't like to lose, which is a basic instinct of everyone. You lose once and you might try to rationalize it in your own mind and you just might get to accepting defeat. I accepted my defeat in Berkeley, but I won't accept it again. I know why it happened; you can never shrug it off.

A lot of people never learn from their defeats. They try to shrug it off as though it isn't important. There is so much to be learned from different races. You learn that, too, because 3 years ago I didn't try to analyze why I won or lost a race. I guess that comes with maturity and experience.

T&FN: *Next year will be the big one, the year many people will point everything toward.*

Paige: But it isn't everything. It's one of the ultimate goals, but it isn't everything. Some people place so much emphasis on the Olympic final, trying to get that gold. There's only one gold medal and there are thousands of people running the mile out there.

And there are so many things that can happen. At the Olympic Trials next year, you could have a hangnail on your toe or a toothache and you might be through. I mean I will have trained 2 hard years by then and it would be very painful if I didn't make it, but you can't let that ruin your life.

T&FN: *Being that you haven't competed much internationally, how do you feel about next year, both in terms of experience and tactics?*

Paige: I'm learning a lot now, but I can relate a lot of it to indoor track. Running on the tighter tracks, with the smaller fields, just gives me that much more racing experience. It makes me more aware of the people around me and I've learned that concept of people close to me. I can move quickly to either prevent things from happening or controlling things that do happen.

I may lack experience against the Europeans, but I feel indoors is very valuable. Indoors is competitive, tight racing and you have to really think to run indoors. That's what it takes to run against Europeans; you have to think. □