

DON KARDONG

With all the hats he wears as a prominent figure in the U. S. distance running scene, Don Kardong easily could double as a juggler.

The 39-year-old Stanford grad, who will join the ranks of Masters runners on December 22, was a world-class marathoner in the '70s. His PR 2:11:16 gave him 4th in the 1976 Olympic 26-miler, and he won the Honolulu Marathon and Peachtree 10K during his competitive days.

Currently, there is hardly a phase of running in which the gregarious Washingtonian is not involved: he chairs TAC's Long Distance Running Committee for men; he is president of the Association of Road Running Athletes (ARRA); he is director of the Bloomsday 12K race, staged each May in his hometown of Spokane; he is a clinic speaker, media commentator and general consultant about running.

All that varied experience gives Kardong a broad perspective on the road scene. So when asked why the U. S. hasn't had a World Ranked marathoner since 1983--after 13 consecutive seasons with at least one American globally rated--his comments cover as wide a range as his experience:

Kardong: In this country, we went from having virtually no interest in the marathon, to where--in the heyday of Frank Shorter--the marathon became the hopeful indicator of a developing skill in long distance running. It was probably an overrated skill, but nevertheless, we began to think of ourselves as a nation of distance runners when that really wasn't true.

Early on, because there wasn't much foreign competition on the roads; U.S. runners did pretty well, pretty often. But as the marathoning/road running scene developed, especially after more and more money became available, it started drawing in the full gamut of international competition and things got tough again for American runners.

For a time, we had Americans who did race the marathon too often, because of the economic opportunities. Couple their overracing with the emergence of foreign stars, and the decline of



"If economics become your first reason for running, you're in bad shape."

U.S. fortunes is more understandable.

T&FN: Has the proliferation of so many other distance races on the roads, as well as increased financial opportunities played a big role in the decline of U. S. fortunes?

Kardong: If economics become your first reason for running, you're in bad shape. It's not a good sport in which to make a lot of money. If you want to make a lot of money, get into something high tech. There's not much money to be made in running.

Honestly, I've seen some American runners who have recognized that. They are more sensible about when and where and how often they compete, and I feel they are competing better as a result. But then the problem is, they don't get much visibility.

For example, you and I know that Mark Nenow led the world at 10,000 in 1986, but the average American hasn't a clue to who Mark is. He didn't win any major road races--specifically the New York City Marathon.

That's bad, because Mark has done

in many ways exactly what we want distance athletes to do: don't run the marathon if it isn't their event. He's done very well but who knows him in his own country? But Europeans all know him, of course.

T&FN: Has there been the factor of an attitude in which the athlete feels he will be at the peak of his powers for just a short time, so he had better grab as much as he can, as quickly as he can?

Kardong: I honestly feel that was more common among U. S. runners a number of years ago. I don't see them doing that as much anymore. That's something that Dick Beardsley will tell you he did: "I just followed the money too often." Bill Rodgers admits he does the same thing today.

Then you look at guys like Bill and Gerry Donakowski or Pat Porter. They seem to have focused their sights right on where they want to be. There really are a lot of Americans, I feel, who aren't greedy, who aren't overracing, and who are focused.

If American success returns in the distances, I feel it will be because we get one of these athletes who will make use of the money to continue his training. He won't be focused solely on winning the money, but he will have learned to focus first on performance.

That will be a pretty powerful athlete, compared to the old days. I couldn't focus just on training; I had to have a fulltime job. That didn't enhance my ability to compete.

Yes, I did make it to the Trials and the Olympics and I did well. But I don't feel that it should be the goal of TAC, for example, to minimize opportunities so that only the strong survive. That's foolish.

What we have to do is convince the athlete not to focus on money. An athlete needs to learn to figure out for himself, or along with his coach, exactly where he wants to succeed. But don't count on/plan on getting rich through running.

I feel that the best thing for athletes to do today is to find a career or full-time job, but find one with a sympathetic employer, or a well-paying part-time job, or some situation which gives them flexibility. But I don't feel

by JON HENDERSHOTT

it's wise to try to make a living through just running. Sure, it's possible to do, but you also know your career will run out much sooner than it would otherwise.

T&FN: *Are marathon/road racers finding that their legs just aren't built to take all the pounding of frequent racing, as well as 100 miles a week of training?*

Kardong: Well, Mark Nenow was quoted in your magazine to the effect that the marathon has a smiley, friendly face on the outside, but that just masks the devil in disguise.

I'm not sure it's that bad, but you do have to be sensible about when you run your marathons. If you get caught up in the idea that the marathon is another way to make money and run them two months apart, most likely your body won't be able to take that. The prolific guys like Kjell-Erik Stahl are by far the exception. Most runners don't thrive on multiple marathons.

T&FN: *Why do you feel the U. S. hasn't had a marathoner in the World Rankings since Alberto Salazar in 1982? Is it a different generation of Americans; are the world's marathoners that much better, what?*

Kardong: I feel there are a number of things going on. First, it may not be that you are doing anything wrong; it may just be part of a cycle. At the moment, we could also ask why there aren't any dominant middle distance guys from New Zealand? So there is that argument.

Another part of it, I feel, has been a tendency in recent years for Americans not to run the marathon--particularly our best runners like Nenow or Porter. Whatever money might be available to them in the marathon doesn't matter, because they have other goals. That's a good choice, even though it makes our international fortunes not as good.

Then, you have to realize we do have more international competition now. You can't win a major marathon today with the kind of time which would have won just a few years ago. The level of competition has gotten much better, because races now draw the very top world-class people.

T&FN: *Did that period of the late '70s/early '80s--with Shorter, Rodgers, Kardong, Tom Fleming, Salazar, Dick Beardsley--lull us into a false sense of security that we were, in fact, a nation of top distance runners?*



The long and lean Kardong had great range as a runner, scoring in the NCAA 3M for Stanford and finishing 4th in the 1976 Olympic Marathon.

Kardong: I think so, but we also can't just throw up our hands and say we will wait for this down cycle to work itself out and then we can be on the upswing again and return to the top. There are things we want to do now to improve that situation.

But we haven't done the things very well which other countries have done to develop good distance runners.

Most of all, we haven't created a system which nurtures distance running talent for as many years as it often requires to reach a peak.

We don't have a strong club system, like England. We don't have a strong national program, like Italy,

with goals and priorities clearly defined and training precisely focused.

More or less, we tell our talented runners, "Make it on your own." There is some help--it's better than it used to be--but the situation still isn't one that's likely to stimulate talented people to stick with it for a long period. Some guys can thrive--and survive--in that kind of system, but it isn't the best system for developing and nurturing talent.

T&FN: *Then, too, the American collegiate system--with its definite track & field orientation--isn't aimed at developing post-graduate marathoners.*

Kardong: You know, there are a lot of pluses to the collegiate system as far as developing talent--in some events. But by and large, that system hasn't been good for distance running, except to point out to certain runners whether they really can be any good in the sport or not.

But after college, there isn't any mechanism to pick up the slack. Most often, a runner with some talent may be forced to quit serious running--right at age 26 or 27--when he is developing.

T&FN: *You went through the college system; you made the Olympic team as a postgraduate; now you're a legislator and a race organizer. With all that varied experience, what knowledge do you try to share with younger runners?*

Kardong: The thing is, in the U. S., there are a tremendous number of varied opportunities for runners: indoor track, outdoor track, cross country, roads, marathons.

What I always hope happens--and this is what I have told runners--is that an athlete decides for certain where he wants to focus. He or she determines what is most important, along with the counsel of a coach or advisor. Then, secondly, you work on a structure that will help them achieve those goals.

Something important in all of this is that they know they won't be criticized if they don't choose to emphasize the national team in the marathon or in track. The national organization can promote several varied programs, and the athletes hopefully will decide what they want and then can be given the mechanism to achieve their goals.

But the key is for the athlete to figure out what he wants to achieve athletically, and then set out on a plan that focuses only on that attainment. □