

Erik Nedeau

by Sieg Lindstrom

Erik Nedeau's damn glad to be the guy he is, thank you. He's a World Indoor bronze medalist at 1500m who last year took 2nd in the NCAA outdoor race at that distance as a Northeastern senior and 3rd at the USATF Championships.

He's also a New Englander partial to black socks and riding the ether of the Internet's track & field list. Through "the Net" he keeps electronic tabs on his competitors, trades jokes, jabs and advice, and kibbitzes with a host of friends he's never met who comprise a completely unofficial and unorganized Ned Fan Club.

Before he started doing any of these things, Nedeau says he was a baseball player "almost from the time I could walk" until success in the indoor hurdles as a soph and some strong track-team friendships in Kennebunkport, Maine, prompted him to quit baseball and turn to sprinting, jumping and hurdling.

That's right, you didn't read miling. Nedeau won events from the indoor 300 to the outdoor triple jump at Maine's state championships, and he even grabbed a 4th in the decathlon at the '89 USATF Junior Olympics the summer after his senior year.

Nedeau attracted little attention from major college coaches, but Mark Lech, Ned's coach to this day and himself a former indoor 800 All-America for Northeastern, thought he saw the makings of a middle-distance talent.

When he became the shock finalist in the '92 Trials 800, Ned proved Lech right. Coach and athlete decided then and there, though, that he had to move up once more. And so, in 1993, began the transition that made Erik Nedeau a miler.

We caught up to Nedeau in the apartment he shares with his brother near Massachusetts-Amherst, where he is working on a master's in sport management while training for the summer campaign.

T&FN: You're a World Indoor medalist at 1500. How would that have sounded to you six years ago when you were a high school senior?

Nedeau: I would not in my wildest dreams at the end of high school have thought I would be where I am now. It wouldn't even have crossed my mind except in a late-night fantasy. That would have been the only way I would have thought of chasing Olympic dreams, competing in a World Championships, medaling in a World Championships... at the mile, of all distances. That would have been the furthest thing from reality at that point.

Even after the first two years of college there were not performances indicative of being one of the top milers in the country trying to break into being one of the top in the world.

It was just each step establishing myself and improving each year, and then all of a sudden in '92 at the Olympic Trials, I find myself in the thick of the action, the little guy that no one knows of who's standing there in the final. It was around that point that I realized my running was going to go a bit farther than I had ever anticipated.

T&FN: What kept you transitioning up in distance from event to event?

Nedeau: My coach in high school had always said, "You're going to be an 800 runner or a miler," and for that reason, I was always sprinting. Once I started to develop in the 800, it was clear that I wasn't going to be an 800 runner. I could run fast, but I didn't have the leg speed that was going to be necessary to compete at the highest level, whereas I felt that the speed I had and, hopefully, the strength that I could build would allow me to be a miler.

Making the transition Mark and I just felt should be a gradual stepping-stone process. My first year at Northeastern, I ran primarily the 500 indoors, as well as the 4 x 4. The next year, I mixed it up a little bit, running the 800 and, come outdoors, I ran the 400H all year.

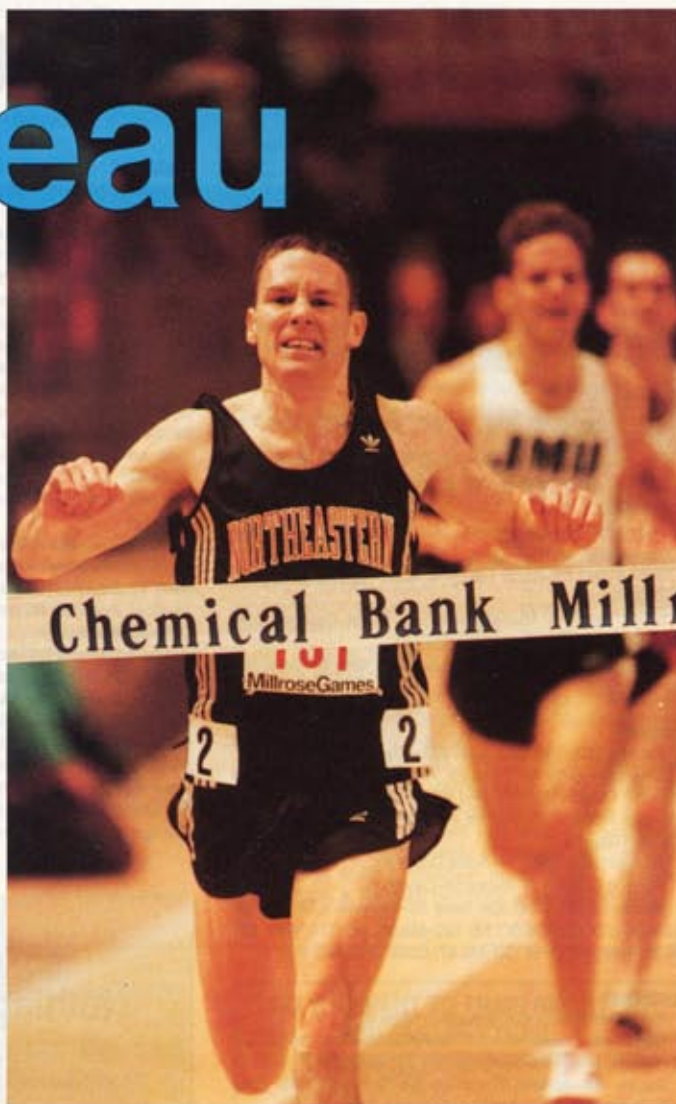
Until the Penn Relays, where I was embarrassed again in the 400H because I couldn't get my steps down. There's a little difference between the 300 and 400H. The last two hurdles of each race I'd just come to a complete stop and I just said, "This isn't what I'm going to excel at. It's uncomfortable for me, I can't get into a rhythm."

T&FN: Why stop at the mile? Do you plan to continue on up to the 5000?

Nedeau: [Laughs] You mean seriously racing it? No. Maybe I'm just a true miler, a guy moving up to the mile. Actually, when I get up above the mile it's not very comfortable. I've only run two 5000s and both of them were early-season races more as strength workouts.

T&FN: And how fast did you run?

Nedeau: Like 14:45. I know I'm capable of a lot more than that and I would like to get



into a real fast one just to see what I can do, but I think I'll stop at the steeplechase before I move up to the 5.

T&FN: As a serious endeavor?

Nedeau: Definitely. I think that before moving up I've got a lot of work cut out for me in the 1500/mile, so I have no plans to rush into the steeple now, but just judging from my history, my background as a hurdler, the hurdling form is there; the speed is there. The strength work that I do for the 1500 I believe can carry to a fast 3000. It seems that all the pieces of the puzzle would fit into a nice little steeplechase picture, but that's down the line.

T&FN: Have you run a steeple?

Nedeau: Nope... Actually, I did in high school. I ran 10:15, and that was after 10 events.

T&FN: Ten events?!

Nedeau: Long story. The summer after I got out of high school, my brother, myself and two of my friends went to a meet in Maine, the Maine TAC Championships, that was a team scoring meet. We set up our own team and tried to beat this team of like 30 guys. I did all these different events. I ran a 15, a 400 hurdles, 100, 110 hurdles, long jump, javelin, triple jump, I did a 4 x 1, I think I threw the discus and—what else?—the 200 maybe.

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The last event was the steeplechase and it was raining. My friend [current Dartmouth steeplechaser] Sam Wilbur, earlier had done the race walk. He's a good friend of mine and somehow—I don't know how I did it—I talked him into running the 5000m race walk. He stuck through it, he did the whole thing.

Because he did that, he said, "OK, do the steeple." I really couldn't back out of it because, after all, I'd made him walk around for 3.1 miles on the track. I was ragging on him every step of the way. So I said, "OK, I'll do the steeple." It was interesting. I actually kind of liked it, but I haven't done it since.

T&FN: Did you win the team title?

Nedeau: No, we lost by like 25 points or so but we gave everything we had and it was just kind of fun.

T&FN: Sounds like you just couldn't get enough competition.

Nedeau: There was really nothing else to do for the summer. I worked, as well, cooking at the seafood restaurants back home.

T&FN: Living in Kennebunkport did you ever cook for George Bush?

Nedeau: I actually cooked at a restaurant that he frequented, Mabel's Lobster Claw Restaurant, and he was supposed to be in one night and then something came up. Probably a golf game or something. The Secret Service was actually in there checking out everything, and my boss was all excited that he was coming in and then, whatever, the plan fizzled. But almost. I could almost say my claim to fame is that I cooked for the president.

T&FN: Well, you certainly are a famed member of the track & field list on the Internet. When did you get involved with that?

Nedeau: A friend of mine from Arkansas, John Schieffer, came up to visit and we got on the day before Eamonn Coghlan broke 4:00.

We watched the race and then we came back and gave a little play-by-play on the Net. Somebody asked for an in-depth type thing, from the start to the finish. This was like 2:00 in the morning and it was the off-season so we had been gallivanting around the city in a drunken stupor, so I said, "OK, you want more? I'll give you more." So I rambled on and sent it out, and then I got a call from Shawn Price and he wanted to know if he could use my e-mail to tie into the *T&FN* story about Eamonn breaking 4:00. I said, "Sure, I don't care."

T&FN: Obviously, you're literally wired-in

to track & field through the Net and you can use it to keep in touch with some of your competitors. Is it useful in other ways?

Nedeau: It's also a good forum to give advice. I get lots of individual letters from people who are on the Net and they say, "You've reached this level and I know you probably don't have time to talk, but if maybe you could give a little advice."

I've talked to I-can't-even-tell-you-how-many people. Obviously, I'm not the one with all the answers, but I can give personal history on what I've done and what's worked for me, which may or may not work for somebody else. But often times it gives them sort of another avenue, another way to look at what they're doing.

I think it's real beneficial for the sport because you never can tell who I'm giving advice to. It may be the next Ned, nobody knows of them and maybe in two years. . . Boom.

T&FN: Since your name is known, your posts on the Net must attract attention.

Nedeau: Through it I develop kind of an enclave of fans. I've gone to meets where I've heard a lot of "Ned!" screams when I know maybe one or two people who are supposed to be at the meet. Then I'll get home and I'll have maybe four or five messages from people saying, "I know you don't know me, but we were screaming for you. That's great. You and the black socks kick ass."

With my black socks, I've kind of developed into this little cult figure.

T&FN: Why do you wear black socks?

Nedeau: People that I talk to say, "Oh, the black socks. You derive power from them," like from some ancient god that wore black socks. I'd love to say that, but it's just plain and simple that at Northeastern I had a black uniform. I just thought, "Well, black uniform; let's just try the black socks." And I liked it. Now I've got a black uniform with New Balance, and it just kind of goes with it.

There's also a little bit of a mental aspect that goes with it, in that the black socks stand out.

When you stand on the line you notice right away that one person's a little bit different from the others. Because of that difference, it kind of puts you in the spotlight so there's that little bit of added pressure or incentive to do well.

T&FN: You certainly had a lot of eyes on you and your socks this past winter in the televised meets of the Mobil Indoor Series.

Nedeau: I made my fair share of mistakes this indoor season, but the reason I raced so many miles indoors was for that main reason—there are a lot more tactics involved indoors than outdoors. If I can master the indoor, then I'll be that much better for outdoor.

T&FN: So the '95 indoor season was a crash course in tactics?

Nedeau: That's exactly what it was. I didn't want to go over to Europe this year and try to go to school. I want to race, I don't want to be running and learning at the same time. So I felt, OK, indoors is fairly low key. Every weekend I wanted to go to school. Marcus O'Sullivan was a great teacher.

T&FN: I understand he gave you some advice before the Barcelona race?

Nedeau: A little bit of advice before. A lot of it after. We went out to an Irish bar after.

T&FN: An Irish bar in Barcelona?

Nedeau: It was one of three, Kitty O'Shea's.

T&FN: A little celebration of the unexpected medal?

Nedeau: I knew that I had a big kick, but where that thing came out of, I don't know. Never in my life have I felt so fast over the last part of a race. I remember the last 200 feeling how fast I felt but just not having anywhere to go with it. I didn't know if anything was going to open up.

Then all of a sudden with 50 to go, 40 to go, when Niall [Bruton] went wide there was this straight shot and I just thought, "Go!" Usually I don't think at the end of a race. I'm just, "OK, get to the finish line." But I remember thinking, "Damn, I am just movin'." I wish they'd have a clock on me for the last 50 because I am flying."

I was seeing these guys like Fermin Cacho go shooting by. When I crossed the line, I thought, "I think I just got 3rd but there's no way." I actually watched the replay on the video screen. I thought, "My God, I got 3rd. What are you doing getting a bronze medal, beating these guys?"

But it really hit hard at the same time—what do you mean, "What are you doing?" This is what you've been working for. If you have any doubt now, then that should be gone. It was a real good confidence-builder that I can actually run with these guys. □

NEDEAU IN A NUTSHELL

Erik Laurence Nedeau was born August 30, 1971, in Island Falls, Maine, and is 5-11/155. Graduated from Kennebunk High School in '89.

PRs(with all-time list positions in parentheses): 400—49.0 ('91); 800—1:46.19 ('92); 1000—2:19.18i (in: 3, 3 A) ('95); 1500—3:38.31 ('94); Mile—3:57.28i ('95); 400H—53.3 ('91).

Major Meets: 800—6)NCAA, 7)OT ('92); 3)NCAA In ('93). 1500—9)NCAA, 7)USA ('93); 2)NCAA, 2)USA ('94); 3)WIC ('95). Mile—s)NCAA In ('93); 4)USA In ('95).

Progression (only ranking to date is No. 7 U.S. in the '92 800):

Year	Age	Affiliation	800	1500	Mile
'88	16	Maine HS Jr	c2:01	—	—
'89	17	Maine HS Sr	c1:58	c4:12	—
'90	18	Northeastern Fr	(injured—redshirted outdoors)		
'91	19	Northeastern Fr	1:48.67	—	4:18.0i
'92	20	Northeastern So	1:46.19	3:42.87	4:07.50i
'93	21	Northeastern Jr	1:48.94	3:43.87	3:59.68i
'94	22	Northeastern Sr	1:46.97	3:38.31	4:00.61i
'95	23	New Balance TC	1:47.81i	3:44.91i	3:57.28i