

Athlete of the Year

HENRY RONO

The mantle of "The Greatest Athlete In The World" is weighty. So too is it tenuous, and it is frequently as amorphous as it is fleeting. Henry Rono of Kenya currently carries that burden.

There are those who will claim that it belongs to a Reggie Jackson, and others who will swear by a Vasily Alexeyev, Bjorn Borg, or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. But for the world of track and field, Rono is the only choice for 1978.

Rono's greatness lies not only in the four World Records which fell to him last year, although credentials of 7:32.1, 8:05.4, 13:08.4 and 27:22.5 alone merit the applause of even the most disinterested track observer. And a pair of Commonwealth titles (steeple and 5000) did nothing to tarnish his reputation.

As amazing as anything else about Henry Rono's season was its incredible duration. From November of 1977, when he won the NCAA cross country title for the second time, until that same race a year later, Rono turned in marks of a uniformly high caliber and with great frequency, routinely defeating the rest of the best in the world.

A full year in peak form. (Actually, a bit more, as his surge to the top began with a non-winning 27:37.1 in September, 1977.) Form which showed nary a crack until the 1978 NCAA cross country race, where the effort of "boldly going where no man had gone before" caught up with Rono, and, barely going through the motions, he finished fourth-from-last.

The media characteristically likes to find a "peg," or identifying trait, of a famous athlete. Generally he falls into either the broad category of the Dwight Stones Type, i.e., effervescent and open (if not as controversial and acerbic as Stones) or the opposite: reclusive and press-shunning, a la Jan Merrill and Steve Ovett. It is into that latter category that Rono has been placed. After a season such as Rono's in 1978, where he became the hottest item in Europe since the Saudis discovered oil, one expected to find—if, indeed, one could find at all—a Rono who would follow his traditional posture of allowing Washington State Coach John Chaplin to do the talking. For not only does Chaplin preserve the well-earned privacy of the Athlete Of The Year, he also has a way with the English language that Rono does not.

It was therefore a surprise to knock on Rono's Fresno motel door in November and hear a bright "Come in."

Locked door notwithstanding, Rono, fresh from the shower after a victorious run in the NCAA District 8 harrier race, offers a warm hello and handshake to a reporter who is as unknown to him as any who have accosted him during the year.

Despite that, he happily agrees to an interview, if he can find a sauna first. No sauna is around, so a fanished party repairs to the coffee

Interviewed by John Barbour

shop. It, alas, is closed, leaving only the cocktail lounge. Surprisingly though, the dark and empty quiet (save the background sound of a TV football game) proves conducive to the effort to know and understand the mind as well as the well-tuned body of Henry Rono.

Unable to predict the inglorious race that was to befall him the next week, he responds willingly, his answers punctuated with long, thoughtful pauses. For in spite of the language limitations, Rono is articulate; thought and sincerity fill those gaps where words fall short:

T&FN: Did you have any idea a year ago at this time that you would end up breaking four World Records in 1978?

Rono: It was something that came into my mind. . . Last year, when I found out I could run a World Record for 5000 and 10,000, I had to go to work, harder. . . to run, like 12M in the morning and to run again in the afternoon. Also do a lot of exercise, lifting weights.

T&FN: Was the 3000 the hardest race for you?

Rono: Yeah, I think the 3000 is the best, and the steeplechase. I can run a better time for 3000, but I had a problem. When they were announcing the time, they didn't tell me. The second lap I was kind of wondering—they looked at me and I wanted to hear the time.

T&FN: Is that why you ran 3 straight laps in 60 during the second half of the race? Were you trying to make up for lost time?

Rono: I was trying to make up, yes. But it was good to start and then keep it up. It is good to keep the same speed all the way; it's a lot easier. I was thinking of running 7 laps the way I was then.

T&FN: I heard a story that the same thing happened during your steeplechase record in Seattle. Supposedly the announcer gave one of the lap times, you looked right at him and began to run noticeably faster.

Rono: Yeah, when they say that, you know, I notice. My aim was to run a World

Record. And when I heard that, it made me worry again. Then I knew I'd better not relax. But I heard the man announce, "64, 65," and I knew it was all right.

T&FN: So you knew you were on record pace the whole time in Seattle?

Rono: I was on a pace of 8:10. And I set it.

T&FN: Things worked almost perfectly for you all year. But what would you do differently if you had the chance, say in a race like the 2M against Ovett?

Rono: You know, I stayed at home 8 days before that. I didn't even go to training.

T&FN: Oh, really?

Rono: And at home, you know, with people like my family, they wanted me to eat a lot of food [laughs]. And when I thought I was going to run 7:50 for 3000; I ran 7:45 and was beaten. Then I came to Italy and ran 13:15. I didn't know I was going to run that fast, and I was very dizzy after I ran, because I had run at night, and then to run the next day. Then when I ran 2 miles, I was thinking that I didn't have enough practice. But I was thinking of 8:08.

Even now, I'm still thinking about it. I can run that. But when we were running, I took a look behind, and I thought his (Ovett's) running looked kind of relaxed, and I was physically tired.

T&FN: Do you think an 8:00 2M is possible?

Rono: No. . . I think, myself, I can run 8:08, maybe 8:05. When I ran my 3000 in Norway, if I had run another 200 meters I would have had 8:04. And I think the steeplechase record can be broken, I can do that. But I don't know about 8:00.

T&FN: Besides yourself, who are the best runners in the world?

Rono: The toughest? [Long pause.] This guy Steve Ovett, you know. And this guy Coghlan is very good. And this guy from Oregon, Salazar, can be a very good runner. But still, he has to learn so many things.

T&FN: What kinds of things?

Rono: It's what they think about when they're running. He's thinking too much.

T&FN: Ovett and Coghlan are both primarily milers. How about longer-distance runners?

Rono: Steve Ovett. Steve is a tough guy. And there's one guy from Switzerland, Ryffel.

T&FN: What if you were to put all the best racers into one race, as in the Olympics. Could an evenly-paced race win?

Rono: I don't think very much about the last kick, you know. I don't think someone's going to run under 54 in the last quarter when we run 5000 meters.

I think that many runners will be starting to kick in the middle of the race, whereas someone else will have more energy to kick if they take it real slow. Even I can run 55 in the last quarter if it's slow.

T&FN: But in the Olympics it will be your objective to make sure that the pace is fast enough that it doesn't come to that?

Rono: Yeah. That's why if I thought "These guys are very fast, the last quarter is going to be run in 53," it would be very easy to be beaten. So I won't think that way. I know I'll run 62,61, then I can run 56 or 57 at the end.

T&FN: Ron Clarke was supposed to do that to the field at Tokyo in 1964, but couldn't. Do you think you could?

Rono: Yes; I think one of the problems is in figuring out what is going to work. Maybe some can't run as tough because they have a problem in the middle of a race. That's a part of my thinking, too. So when I go into a race I know my plan is going to work.

T&FN: So you take each race as it comes, then.

Rono: Yes, and it depends on the race. I might run 3 races in the Olympics, and to know how to run each one ahead of time is quite a problem. I like to know the program, so I'll know ahead of time how it's going to work. I don't want to be too surprised when I get there.

T&FN: So you plan your races carefully. Do you think about running a lot?

Rono: It's kind of something that's a part of my program. I can run in the morning, but I don't put it in my mind. I haven't taken it that seriously, as, say, my bookwork, when I'm studying with my mind. Right now I don't think... [laughs] sometimes I don't run in the mornings.

T&FN: Henry, with running as popular as it is these days, there must be many people who work as hard as or harder than you. What makes you different?

Rono: I would think that would be... kind of psychological. Most distance runners, I think, are training enough, but they don't know how to relax. I think if you don't train enough, you have to worry a little. You have to finish off the fatness of your stomach or else it will affect you, and you will be worried all the time. But if you are well-trained, you don't worry, because there's no fat in your stomach. And you can't eat things like ice cream, a lot of sugar...

T&FN: Then you watch your diet pretty closely?

Bible of the Sport



Bill Killian

Rono: I'm careful about what I eat. They can eat, but not these things like cookies. Some things are going to be digested very quickly, because your body wants to use everything, but it must leave something.

T&FN: But a beer now and then is OK.

Rono: [laughs] Yes. You have to be careful. I drink beer, you know, but not when I am training. I think the problem with most athletes is not something to do with the muscles, or the diet. Everything must build up your mind.

T&FN: Do you think, then, that there are other runners of equal ability who just don't prepare the same way?

Rono: Yes, there are other runners, but they don't take care of themselves. Some take care, but are over-thinking, about running. And when they're running, there is tension. That comes from mind.

I remember 1976 when I was in Montreal, I felt lot of pressure [from the African boycott]. I drank beer, but I still couldn't sleep.

T&FN: In those 2 years since Montreal, Henry, your life has changed very drastically, both personally and athletically. How have those years affected you?

Rono: I'm very glad to be in the United States. Now that I've been here 2 years, I am a different person. I'm trying to get along with the people around here. I'm glad I'm in a university, too; I'm learning a lot. Although when I go home to Kenya, I still have a lot of customs, and I still get along with the people.

T&FN: Was making the transition from Kenya to the United States difficult?

Rono: Yes, it was very difficult for me. Here in America there is a different

dialect, you speak English. That took me a while. And I got sick the first day here. I was trying to figure out what was going on, trying to keep up with school and running... it was kind of a big thing for me, because I could hardly remember things. It was not very good, but I was learning, too, to get away from things and become, you know, a new man.

T&FN: "A new man." That's exactly what you had to become, isn't it?

Rono: Yes, to go over that obstacle, that was very tough for me.

T&FN: How was it that you happened to come to Washington State?

Rono: Before the Olympics, these guys from Washington State, like John Ngeno, were training where we were in Kenya. We didn't have as much experience as John. I found out about Washington State because of John Ngeno.

These friends of mine, John and Kip Ngeno were there, and they introduced me to Washington State. And well, I had to go. But before that I had a letter from Colorado, but they said I had to pay money, that they didn't have enough.

T&FN: Colorado didn't offer you a full scholarship?

Rono: They didn't have that, no. Washington State said OK, so I had to go there.

T&FN: And what were your first impressions?

Rono: Well, at first, I could hear what people were saying, but it was hard to talk to them. You can't say "That is wrong, that is right." I could not share or say something, and that was very difficult. But when I got into English class it was very good, I was writing with precision. And to speak it all the time is better.

T&FN: What were your first impressions of John Chaplin?

Rono: The thing with Coach Chaplin was, you know, he was talking very fast, and I was thinking, "Why is this man talking very fast when he knows I have just come from Africa?" But you get used to him doing that, and I thought, "He'll be all right."

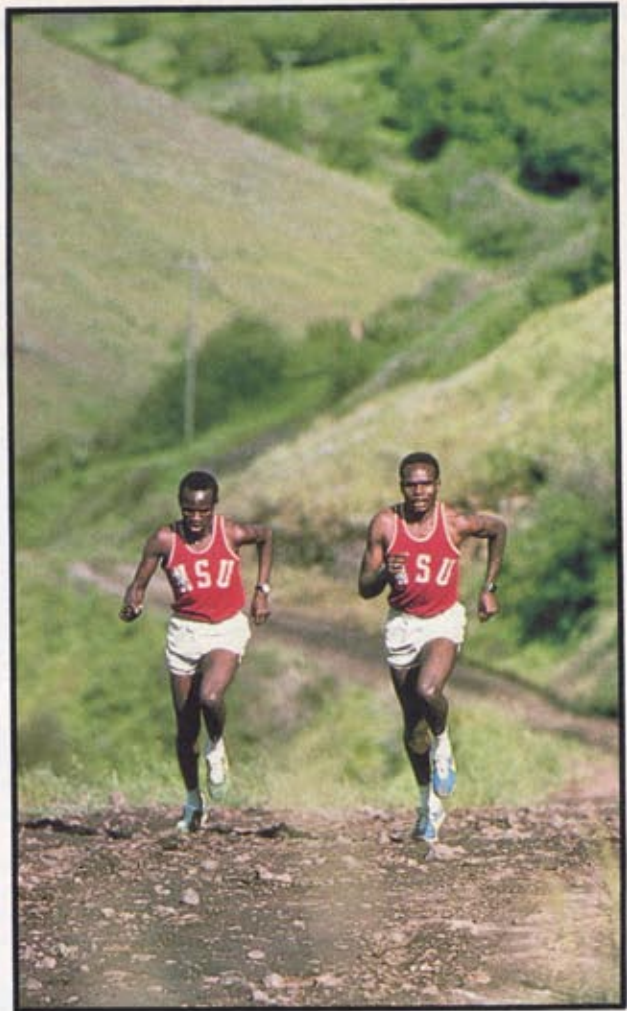
I didn't feel the pressure for 3 months, but after 6 or 7 months it affected me a lot. You get a lot of studies, you feel like if you fail class maybe you'll go home. But really, that's not good. If you go home, the people there would say "Why did you come back here?" and you would say you came home because of... of a lot of pressure. And I didn't want to go to junior college! So I had to work hard again, to swallow it. And running here, too, there's a lot of pressure from the coach [laughs].

T&FN: Do you feel as though you weathered that pressure-filled period fairly well?

Rono: Yeah, I tried very hard. In running, I won the conference, and then I tried to win the NCAA steeplechase. But I was feeling sick, and didn't run good. I had a physical illness. Later on I went to



The analysis of Rono's physiology hasn't been made public, but his oxygen uptake is rumored to be at near-record levels.



Rono and Joel Cheruiyot pound out the mileage on a lonely Eastern Washington road.

The Commonwealth steeplechase typified Rono's year-long position—always at the front.



photography by Tony Duffy

Germany, to train there.

T&FN: *It seemed as though you took a long portion of the summer of '77 off, and then came back in September when you ran that fast [27:37.1] 10,000 against Brendan Foster at the Coca-Cola meet.*

Rono: I got away from things. I didn't even read books sometimes. I kept kind of relaxing to myself, training when I felt like training.

T&FN: *And then everyone knows what happened in 1978. But what about next year? Will you run with the same intensity as this year, or might you ease off a bit and push hard again in 1980?*

Rono: I think I might not run so many races. I'll only run 2 things, the 10,000m and steeplechase. I still want to run a 10,000m World Record, because they say they might not recognize my record now.

T&FN: *Yeah, and I hope they're wrong. You ran it and it should be accepted.*

Rono: I think I might still get it back.

T&FN: *What was it like to go back to Kenya this summer and spend some time at home?*

Rono: I stayed a long time in Kenya. I stayed at home 2 days the first time I went there, then the next time I didn't stay at home, I was running around. And then I came to stay 3 days, 4 days. I went home about 4 times, and that was very good. . . I enjoyed it.

T&FN: *Can you explain a little about The Order Of The Burning Spear which you received? Yours was the second degree, wasn't it?*

Rono: The second degree, yes.

T&FN: *Is that equivalent to what Jomo Kenyatta was?*

Rono: Kenyatta was First-Class, I was Second-Class. That's equivalent to vice-president.

T&FN: *What does it mean to you to have received that honor?*

Rono: Kind of, well, important to me. It's important to me when I'm in my country. I don't have problems with people, I can park my car anywhere.

T&FN: *Were you surprised to receive it?*

Rono: Yes, I was not expecting it. I didn't know how difficult it was, or what it was all about. When they came, they explained what it was all about, that it's a very good thing.

T&FN: *It was interesting to see this summer that the Kenyan AAA attempted to call home so many of its top-name track athletes—Boit, Cheruiyot, Musyoki to name a few—but you weren't among them. Is it difficult for an athlete to compete freely in Kenya?*

Rono: Yes, but they don't affect me, I just ignore them. I just work by myself, no matter what they are doing. Because I

have to work for everything I do; no one's going to give you something, you have to do the work yourself. But they are trying to confuse the athletes, and that's not the right thing, you know.

T&FN: *How would you react if, for example, another boycott took place in Moscow like the one in Montreal?*

Rono: Well, we were sad, because we had been training hard. I think that made me want to come to the United States. Because I had feelings that I would run very well, and then no one was running. I think I would have finished 4th, something like that.

T&FN: *How long do you think you'll run competitively?*

Rono: Until 1984. I want to finish my studies, then I'll be able to do what I want to do.

T&FN: *Ah, yes, your studies. What do you think of the academic life at Washington State?*

Rono: I enjoy it very much, but I worry very much when I'm studying.

T&FN: *Is studying hard for you?*

Rono: Yes, because it can get very complicated. You have to do a lot of tests, a lot of homework, a lot of papers and you have to go to these lab classes in science. You know, studying is more important to me than running. I love running, but I know the form of it. But studying, I don't know how most of the way.

T&FN: *So your studies have a higher priority than running?*

Rono: Yes, that's why I'm in school, I want to study. I want to work harder, to be ahead of the other students. That's what I'm thinking right now.

I get up in the morning and I run 10M at 6:00 pace, and that is kind of to get me through. And when I feel like running very fast, I run fast in practice with the other guys. You know, in anything I do, I don't want to tell myself that I am second. I don't want to be second something. I want to be first in anything I do.

T&FN: *You're an Industrial Psychology major. Have you thought about how you're going to use your degree?*

Rono: I don't want to say it, but I'm thinking that I would like to . . . to teach. I would like to have another degree, to do graduate work, to learn more about psychology. Because I would like to do so many things in the future, it's hard to decide between my goals in science and my goals to run fast. I would like to work with biology together with psychology.

T&FN: *Would you then go back to Kenya and get a job?*

Rono: Anywhere I could get it, because I would love to teach everybody. The way I am, I don't just want to say I'll go to Kenya and teach my people, because I'd like to teach everybody. And I'd like to write a book, something like that.

T&FN: *You'd like to write a book?*

Rono: Yes, that's what I'm studying hard for.

T&FN: *If you were to write a book today, what would you write it about?*

Rono: Well, I think I would write about my philosophy of . . . of life. What I'm thinking is this: say someone wants to do something. He cannot be confused, he has to know from the beginning, "I want to reach here." You must be a good listener, to understand what people are saying.

T&FN: *If you had a message then, for some, it might be "do the best you can in whatever you do."*

Rono: That, and to take things slowly. To figure out "what is that?" and "what does that mean?"

T&FN: *And that is the way you've applied yourself as a runner?*

Rono: That's the way, yes.

T&FN: *That's interesting, because most observers would think that this year you have taken things rather quickly.*

Rono: The reason why I did that is because there's something in me that didn't want to wait for the future. It's the real me, you know; running is the open me. And if I study and get my degree, people can pay attention to me when I write this book about life. But first they know me.

T&FN: *Running, then, is a means of expression, so people will pay attention to you.*

Rono: It opens many ways. I was thinking, back before I was in the army that I wanted to run fast. Then when I was in the army, I started thinking about getting an education. Then I thought, "I can go even faster in the United States," and when I found out that I could get a scholarship in the United States because of running, then I wanted to run very fast. I told myself that when I got there I would have time to get to work.

T&FN: *Speaking of work, have you stopped to reflect that you have been competing at a high competitive level for nearly a full year? Are you tired, physically or mentally?*

Rono: I didn't notice that I was tired until Edmonton. I was just kind of lazy, then, but I was keen. But I don't feel all right nowadays, I'm not very interested in running. I'm in a rest period. I'd like to spend my time reading books, and when I feel like I want to run, then I can start training.

T&FN: *It's very apparent that running is not Henry Rono's whole life.*

Rono: It's not my whole life. Right now, I have a scholarship, and I know that I can get a degree and when I get home I can have a job. But I still want to know so many things, to be sure of the truth of all that happens, to find out what there is to do, what there is to learn.

I'm free now, I can do what I want to do. But I still want something, I still need to do something else. I am still the same person I was last year, except I have learned more.

I'm still learning, and I still want to accomplish some things. □