

by Rich Nichols

# JAMES ROBINSON

**S**tudents of the sport have studied James Robinson from afar, but few have really had an opportunity to get to know the real James Robinson.

To the unacquainted, he appears to be stand-offish, not very talkative, arrogant. To the seasoned runners who have tried unsuccessfully to defeat America's best 800 man, he appears to achieve his victories effortlessly.

But Robinson is a shy, exceedingly modest and astonishingly sensitive and insightful man. He has a true grasp of his abilities and works hard at his craft. He is a student of the event. He knows how each of his most formidable foes will race against him, and as we all know, few have been able to overcome his patented finish.

Importantly, Robinson has not allowed his accomplishments or his world travels to alter his personality or the way in which he relates to those close to him. When one mentions his deeds in the presence of those who don't know him, Robinson shyly withdraws and prefers to talk of other things.

However, after years of silence, on a cool, rainy November evening in Oakland, James Robinson decided to share some of his thoughts with the track & field world:

**T&FN:** "1:44 and nobody knows me." What does that phrase mean to you?

**Robinson:** Well, a couple of years ago it meant a lot, but I think I've proved my point by staying away from the press and doing my talking on the track. So now, not getting the respect or the recognition doesn't mean too much to me. I'm not concerned with that anymore.

I tried to deal with the press; it didn't work, so I decided to forget about it and just keep running.

**T&FN:** Did the lack of publicity and recognition bother you?

**Robinson:** No, not at all. But remember I came into my own around the same time as Mark Belger and I seemed to run better than he did. I won the TAC 3-4 years in a row, but for some reason his name was still in the media and mine wasn't there. It's not that I felt bad about it, or that I was holding a grudge, but I was 19 years old at the AAU and ran a 1:45.7 [1974]. I felt that deserved something.

Of course, there were times when the media just came down on me for races that I ran and lost, saying things like, "Oh, Robinson ran a stupid race," or "He ran a bad race."

But if I was to win a race they'd say "Oh, by the way, Robinson won such and such a race with such and such a time." So I felt all of that was unnecessary. I felt that if they were going to come down on me when I ran bad, then I felt they should boost my name when I ran a good race.



Paul Sutton/Duomo



**T&FN:** *People have constantly criticized your race tactics: "There's Robinson hanging back waiting for the kick." Is it really a kick, and if so, is it planned, or is it just the way you feel most comfortable running?*

**Robinson:** It's a combination of them all. It's a kick when compared to the strength-type runner who goes out there and runs himself into the ground and tries to hold on. He slows down as the race progresses. I've always trained for even splits.

For instance, 52.5. So if the field comes by in 50-51, then I stay at my training time—52.5—and I pass the first 400m ten to twelve meters behind and everybody says, "Oh, Robinson is laying back." But I'm just running according to my race strategy.

Not being a frontrunner works to my advantage. Basically, I just don't have the mental toughness to run up front. If I'm up front it just kills me for some reason. That's another reason I stay away from the front.

So I'll run in 3rd-position if I know the field is a very weak field, but I never really underestimate any runner in the field. Basically, they all run against me the same way all of the time. They know that I have a strong finish and they are all afraid of that, so somewhere in the middle of the race they pick the pace up a bit and try to burn me out. Instead, they end up burning themselves out. So I just follow them, wait, and go for the kill!

**T&FN:** *When do you think you'll break the American Record in the 800m?*

**Robinson:** Well, I was trying to get it this past season but not being a frontrunner and all, I was hoping to meet Boit more in Europe because I need a rabbit to carry me through at least 600m.

Even though I hold back and think after the race that I could have led and gone after it, I just won't do it. So I was just hoping to be in that "fast race" and get the big time. This will be an experimental season. I'm going to train to run up front and I'm going to just go for it. I want it!

**T&FN:** *Why are you so intent on breaking the American Record?*

**Robinson:** If I can get the American Record, then I can say that I've been the fastest American ever over the distance. I will have that behind me and they won't be able to take it away.

**T&FN:** *Rumor has it that your real dream is to break 4:00 in the mile.*

**Robinson [laughing]:** My dream is not to break 4:00 in the mile! My coach has been trying to push me for the past 3-4 years to go after the 4-minute mark. I can

run the mile if I put my heart into it. I believe if I trained and got serious about it I could run 3:52-3:53 level. But I'm just not interested in it. It's too far to think about running.

**T&FN:** *So you wouldn't consider a serious bid at the mile?*

**Robinson:** No, I can't stand the mile. It's too long.

**T&FN:** *You have a unique relationship with your coach—Dr. Proverb Jacobs—that most runners don't have. How would you describe your long-term relationship with Jake?*

**Robinson:** Jake is my advisor. He's more than a coach and it's been that way since I set foot in Laney College. So I just sit back and let him handle my track career. He's got total control of my training, workouts, and where I'm going next to race.

**T&FN:** *What do you think of Sebastian Coe?*

**Robinson:** What can you say about the man? World Record holder in 3 events: he's unique!

**T&FN:** *Do you think Coe is a good competitor, or just a good "clock" runner?*

**Robinson:** In the past couple of years, it seems to me he has been more concerned with setting records. So, using that as a priority, I'd say he's more of a clock runner. He goes out there chasing times; he's always in damn good shape. You can't compete week in and week out and try to do that. So I can understand him staying away from competition.

But I think he can be a good competitor too. It would be something to see him competing weekly and running with everybody else. In that way he'd give people more chances to get even with him and try to even up the score instead of just once or twice a year.

**T&FN:** *So you don't think he races enough?*

**Robinson:** Not for me as it relates to me trying to beat him. I've run the 800 against him only once a year for the past 3 years and he's beaten me every time. So I would like to get him when he comes off one of those World Records [laughs] since I'm not able to get him anywhere else.

**T&FN:** *Can you beat Coe?*

**Robinson:** Uh... as of right now, I'd have to say no. I don't doubt my ability, but he has beaten me 3 times and that speaks for itself.

But I'd like to have that World Cup race over again. The way we finished could have been different, but then again, maybe not.

I was on his shoulder at the 600m mark and then I was cut off by the East German. I lost ground and Coe had the advantage; my chances for running with him to the finish were killed. I really wanted to see who was stronger in the finish.

It wasn't the win or lose factor that held my interest, but being with him to the

finish—then I'd be able to see if I needed to make any changes in my training to stay with him, to beat him. But now I still don't know. I'm still where I was 2 years ago.

**T&FN:** *Do you think your 44-second speed versus Coe's 46.5 speed would give you the edge in a head-to-head race to the tape?*

**Robinson:** No, I wouldn't have the edge. He's super strong; he's got the strength that I basically do not have. So I depend on a fast, even-split race. So does he, but he's got that strength, and he does have leg speed. He's run a 45.6 relay split and I haven't run a 44-second split since 1976.

**T&FN:** *A lot of established runners, like John Walker and others, don't think you train hard enough.*

**Robinson:** I think I train hard enough. I train to compete in meets. I don't pick certain meets and run for a time or a record. So I have to be strong enough and I must train hard enough to run in 26 meets a year. I ran 26 800m races this year and felt like I was getting stronger throughout the season.

Those who say I don't train hard enough may be talking about training as a miler and putting in 70M a week. It all depends on how you look at it. I train short, hard quality. In a good week I'll do 45M. But I'll cover a 6½-mile run in 30-31 minutes. Most of my miles are quality.

**T&FN:** *Do you follow any special diet?*

**Robinson:** Not really. But I have been considering getting into the basics of nutrition. But basically, I just go out and get a hamburger and a can of 7-Up and eat!

**T&FN:** *How much longer will you run?*

**Robinson:** At least through 1984. I made one Olympic team. I don't count 1980 because we did not compete. For all the running we did all we got was a sweat-suit and a couple pairs of Levis. So I made one Olympic team and wasn't ready to run so I'd like to run the '84 Games and see how far I can go.

**T&FN:** *Is there anything you'd like to add?*

**Robinson [laughing]:** Yeah, I'm the greatest! □

James Robinson was born August 27, 1954, in Oakland, California, and is now 5-10/145. Was a miler until his senior year at McClymonds High (Oakland). Has won a record 4 consecutive TAC (AAU) titles and has 5 overall (equal to the best total ever). Never made an NCAA final, but anchored Cal's 4 x 400 teams to 5th ('75) and 3rd ('76). Made the semis of the '76 Olympic 800. He's No. 5 on the all-time U.S. 800 list and has an open 400 best of 46.3 (1976). His progression (with World and U.S. Rankings in parentheses), plus his placings on the yearly lists and in the TAC Championships:

Year	Age	Affil	Class	800	W	US	TAC
1972	17	Ca HS	Sr	1:50.9†			
1973	18	Laney CC	Fr	1:48.5†		29	
1974	19	"	So	1:45.7 (9, 2)	10	2	3
1975	20	Cal	Jr	1:48.5†		-27	
1976	21	"	Sr	1:45.86 (x, 2)	16	3	1
1977	22	ICAC	"	1:45.90 (x, 4)	15	5	3
1978	23	"	"	1:45.47 (4, 1)	8	1	1
1979	24	"	"	1:44.70 (3, 1)	5	1	1
1980	25	"	"	1:45.47 (5, 2)	7	2	1
1981	26	"	"	1:44.63 (27, 1?)	5	1	1

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Rich Nichols, 27, is well qualified to write about James Robinson, as he is still an active 2-lapper himself. A 1976 graduate of Dartmouth, Nichols holds the school record at 1:51.9y, and also won the 1975 Heps indoor 600.

*The Bible of the Sport*