

JOHN WALKER

T&FN Interview by Garry Hill

John Walker didn't have the best of Januaries in 1976 (other than being named Track & Field Athlete of the year by T&FN).

First came the well-documented collapse of the much-banded Bayi-Walker match races.

Then came a double set of Achilles tendinitis, which forced him to cancel his plans for an American indoor tour.

Add to this the pressures of being the world record holder in the mile and you have a harried man. Pursued on all sides.

One could understand then why he might be a bit reticent to grant any interviews. In fact, a "no interview" policy was in effect. So we had to use force.

We threatened not to give him his plaque for being Athlete of the Year. With a grave threat such as that hanging over his head, plus the fact that T&FN people are "such nice guys," we were able to garner some precious words from track's Main Man at the prestigious LA Times Invitational.

As we quickly discovered, all is not gloom on the John Walker front. The Bayi affair, although a disappointment, isn't really the end of the world. The Achilles tendinitis could probably be lived with in anything but an Olympic year, where no chances can be taken.

And, continuing his work with New Zealand's TV-radio network, John was getting his American tour, albeit as an expert commentator.

We let John warm up for our intensive grilling with a little pre-meet work with his broadcast compatriots, to whom he explained the difference between those athletes who are "runners" and those who are "racers."

Those in the latter class are also known as "competitors." John left no doubt that he has little use for the former, and that he is the epitome of the competitor.

So, briefly subverting him from his announced intentions of "coming here for a vacation, no track," we began:

Walker: Is this going to be one of those silly question-and-answer things?

T&FN: Tell us about your injury.

Walker: As you can appreciate, it's the New Zealand summer at the moment and the last 8-9 weeks I've been racing around New Zealand and I've run some 8-9 races, used training tracks, and had different surfaces, instead of stopping when I should have done.

I've been keeping commitments for our New Zealand public and it's sort of kept me racing all the time when I should have been resting. As a result I've got badly inflamed Achilles tendons—both tendons. I've just had to say, "Right, I can't run anymore." But I was a little disappointed in our summer of course.

T&FN: Does the injury allow you to run, to train?

Walker: No, what was happening was that after I raced—probably for three days

afterwards—they were becoming so inflamed and they would stiffen up to such an extent that when I got out of bed in the morning I couldn't walk at all. So now I'm taking anti-inflammatories, physiotherapy, whirlpools, everything else. Trying to get them right. So what I'm doing is having a rest now.

T&FN: Do you want to talk about the Bayi thing, or have you had that hassled into the ground?

Walker: Depends on what you want to ask.

T&FN: Basically, were you disappointed when you didn't get to run against him?

Walker: Ahh, ok. Yah, sure. I was really disappointed, because I'd worked so hard when I went back from Europe. I did 8-9 really hard weeks of mileage and it was good quality stuff. It was something that I've never really done before.

Where I was doing say, three long runs a week and was really punishing my body. And I'd done good speed-work leading up to it and everything was going right. After three days of only speed-work I'd come out and run 1:47 for a half. Then, when the meets were starting to come on a bit I ran 1:46.6. All of this virtually run by myself—no competition.

Then, on the meet I was supposed to run the 1500 against Bayi, the 31st of January, we had a meeting that wasn't a very good night because it was cold. Really, really cold.

I had to warmup with three tracksuits. It was windy. I still ran 3:35.6 by myself. So my coach and I reckon that I was ready for a 3:32 that night.

T&FN: What kind of shape did you have yourself planned for in the Bayi series; compared to the kind of shape you want to be in at Montreal?

Walker: Probably about the same.

T&FN: It's possible for you to be in the same shape at both times?

Walker: Well, when you think that I've been doing it for three years now. I reach two peaks a year and I race two seasons, the New Zealand season and European season. I think this is probably why Rod Dixon and I have showed such a rapid improvement over the last couple of seasons. We've done two buildups a year. We've been virtually at peak just about all the time—barring injury of course. And

we're sort of doing buildup upon buildup upon buildup which is making us stronger all the time.

It means that we're getting a lot more racing in, which is great speedwork and it's a great conditioning sort of period. So I think it must be possible, because I've been doing it for the last three years.

T&FN: You did not have a long-range plan of building to an even greater peak at Montreal; you'll stay with basically what you have done the past 3-4 years?

Walker: Right. I feel that with added competition you can always go faster that way. But because we're doing these buildups upon buildups it doesn't make you bored. It gives you something to aim for all the time; because just to say, "It's an Olympic year and three years from now I'm going to be at a peak," is too hard to say. But I feel we've been doing this for the past 3-4 years and this is our way of building up towards Montreal and I think it's working.

T&FN: Missing this indoor season isn't going to put a severe crimp in your plans; it shouldn't alter your training at all?

Walker: The indoors, the way I treat the indoor season is just a part of a holiday. I like to come across here and enjoy the American hospitality, which is great, and just run three indoor meets and just leave it at that. Then go home and start building up.

I've been under a lot of pressure in New Zealand. When you have a whole European season, then to go straight back into a New Zealand season—you've got to take a break somewhere. So I use this as a part of my break.

I cut my mileage virtually down to nothing. Run three indoor meets, spend 2-3 weeks over here. When I go back to New Zealand I'm going back refreshed and want to build up again. This is what I'll be doing this time. Unfortunately, because I can't run this time I'm just jogging around, resting, sleeping.

T&FN: But you'll still get the mental break you need. You'll go back refreshed.

Walker: Oh yes. The mental break is that the press and public are leaving me alone and it's much easier.

T&FN: The press at home has been building you up quite a bit?

Walker: It's not that they're building me up. It's just that as you can appreciate, New Zealand is a very small country, with 3 million people, and that the mile was something that really means something to them. It's still a miler's country. The "everybody knows everybody" sort of