

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



thing. This is the sort of attitude. I just didn't realize there were so many people in the press in the country.

They all mean well, yet everybody meaning well at the same time can get pretty hectic for one person.

T&FN: *Do you enjoy the work you're doing now for the radio?*

Walker: I've been working for the radio for the last year now. I don't usually do too much commentary work, mostly just selling advertising. But when you think about it, it gets very tiring.

You do an 8-hour job, plus having to train twice a day. You get home late—I'm never home before 7:45 at night. By the time you sit down and have your meal, all you want to do is sleep all the time. And you try and fit in a little bit of social life at the same time. It gets a big difficult. It would be good to be something like a European sometime I suppose, where you don't have to work, but then I think it would get boring just sitting around doing nothing all the time.

T&FN: *Speaking of your social life, what has becoming the world's mile recordholder done for your social life, your sex life?*

Walker: It's boosted it up quite considerably . . . I suppose athletics is just like anything else. You get followers of athletics, you get followers of rock groups, everything.

T&FN: *Did you have a good following in Europe?*

Walker: I did all right. The thing is that athletes become so stereotyped they forget that there's another side of the world to live on. There's another life to athletics, as much as running.

I can remember after the world record, the Swedes kicked up a hell of a fuss about Dixon and I sitting down and drinking beer. They just couldn't understand, there were a couple of girls floating around, drinking a few beers at the same time. But this was just a part of our relaxation.

It was good to get away from athletics and talk to girls, and have a few beers and go dancing and stuff like this. We'd do this quite frequently, never go to bed before one in the morning. But we'd sleep late, so we were getting 10-11 hours of sleep. We were training well. This is the other side—relaxation. You've gotta do it.

T&FN: *What do you do to relax at home? You say you don't get home to eat until late.*

Walker: I usually like to go out and dance, see a few girls I know. I knock around with them.

For complete relaxation I love fishing. Just to get away from it, get out of town, get into the country, that is really great.

And I've taken on a new interest now. Two friends and I have leased a race-horse. I really love horses; I reckon they're magnificent animals. We're following that quite considerably now. It's due to race when I get back and it's going to give me a hell of an interest. I get more excited for
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the horse than I do for my races.

T&FN: *What plans did you have, and/or still have for a double at Montreal?*

Walker: Well, when you consider that we're coming out of our summer and to do a full season of training—which I plan on doing now—I'll go back and run 8-9 weeks of mileage and speedwork and start racing again. It's very difficult to get races, especially coming out of the winter and we're going to be a bit short of condition, like the Europeans. So if I can run the 800 first, which hopefully will get me into the final, that will give me three races to get into a reasonable peak for the 1500 final.

When I ran the 800 in the Commonwealth Games, each time I ran I improved. If I can get down to the same sort of condition I was the last time, you never know what might happen.

T&FN: *You're such a competitor, as you were saying earlier, that if you made the 800 final, even if you were in with people who were a lot faster, you're going to be in there trying to win it.*

Walker: Sure. The thing is that if I run in the 800, the 800 will come and I won't even be thinking about the 1500 at all. I'll be trying to win, even though I may not have the real chance to win. Just as much as I'll be trying to win the 1500.

T&FN: *Do you have any reason to prefer the 1500 over the 800, other than the fact that's your record distance?*

Walker: If I could run the 5000 I would run it in preference to the 800. The 1500-5000 double.

T&FN: *Why's that?*

Walker: I've found—I've proven it to myself in training and everything—that the farther I run the better I seem to get. I like to run distance. I like to race distance. I don't like to run it, but I like to race it. The 800, because my basic speed isn't all that good, I find a little difficult. But once I get past the mile, to say 2000-, 3000-meters, eventually up to 5000-meters, I think this will be my true distance.

T&FN: *Speaking of your basic speed, how fast are you over the 400 now?*

Walker: Again, as you can appreciate, I've not run too many 400s. I haven't run one in about three years, and I don't run that many in training either. So my best 400 is 48.9.

I think if I really concentrated on it, and ran 200s and 300s, that sort of stuff, I could probably run 47-flat.

T&FN: *I would think that you would almost have to, to be able to run in the 1:44s as you have.*

Walker: Well, the thing is, my 800 is basically strength. I rely on a lot of strength, and for consistency you have to have that strength.

People can't understand why Rod and I go to Europe every year and can keep on winning. I think it's because, as I said before, the seasons we're running. The two seasons a year. We train really hard when we are in New Zealand.

I run a lot of my mileage at well under 5:00/mile pace when I'm doing mileage.

I've adopted this sort of system where I just can't go out and jog. Even when I run a 23-miler on Sunday it's all under 6:00/mi¹⁰ pace. And that's up and down hills.

So, not only do I thrash my body training, but I thrash it in my races as well.

T&FN: *Jumping back a bit, after you got home from Europe, did you have a completely dead period, away from training?*

Walker: Yes, it was really tough, because when I got back I was sick. I picked up a virus on the way back from Europe and when I got back to New Zealand I had one of these 48-hour bugs and I was still in the process of shaking it.

For the next 4-5 weeks I just jogged lightly for a little while, because I find that if I take time completely off for a great period of time that I get injury problems, knee problems, such as that.

With demands that were put on me—everybody was having a "Sportsman of the Year" dinner, speaking engagements, TV, the press—I liked it. I was starting to like it at least. I didn't enjoy the speaking part of it, but enjoyed the after-functions, the booze. I started putting on weight, something like a stone [14 lbs], 3/4-stone. Eventually it just got too much and I just had to say, "No more." Everyone and their dog was demanding my time. You know, "I know you're very busy, but how'd you like to come here?"

T&FN: *Gee, makes me feel comfortable.*

Walker: That is what happened. Then I spent time helping Dick Tayler launch his book. Travelling with that guy killed me. I came back to Auckland and I was a wreck.

I wasn't doing too much training in this period of time. I also found it immediately very hard to get any stimulus to start training again. But once I gradually got back into it, it came around.

T&FN: *What do you think of the medal hopes of some of your rivals?*

Walker: I think the most difficult thing at Montreal will be getting through the heats and semis. I don't regard the final as the most difficult thing at all. You either win the final or you blow it. With the heats and semis you get a lot of people who are non-competitors in the race. People who shouldn't really be there anyway. These are the people I worry about. Like Wohlhuter and Ryun getting into difficulties at Munich.

Tactically, the prelims are going to be the hardest thing to get through. For me, I'm going to respect everybody who is in the final.

But I'll be putting more emphasis on Bayi, naturally, because I think he's going to take it out really quick. And to win the Olympics I think I'm going to have to get out with him.

T&FN: *Did you see anybody in Europe this summer you would consider a real gold-medal possibility in the 1500? Or do you and Bayi have a fairly good lock on the gold?*

Walker: Well, the way I see it at the moment—and I've raced against everybody in the world this year and last year, except Bayi—the only one that impressed me too much was [Thomas] Wessinghage of West Germany. But you've got to consider that he got that time, 3:36.4, it was off me, me pacing for him.

As far as I can see, the 1500 seems to be one of the weaker events, even though it has got to be one of the fastest events. You might say that you could get a surprise, but you just don't come on it overnight. You've got to work up to it. The potential I saw around Europe this year: there just wasn't anybody that could really come sprinting through at the finish. If there is, I'd want to start wondering where.

I think Graham Crouch [of Australia] will be up in the final. He seems to peak himself for that one particular event. He'll be up there in 3:36, maybe even faster. Ken Hall, the guy who was second in my mile, he impressed me the way he came up really quick last year, but I hear he's injured at the moment.

The Olympics are a dreaded sort of event. I would rather see an athlete classed on his overall performance. The consistency of his career. Ron Clarke, I feel, was judged by the Olympics, which I think is unfair. He had the capabilities and strength of mind to go out and win, which he did. And break records. I don't think breaking records is everything, but if you can win . . .

People keep comparing me with Bayi all the time, but if Bayi's not there to run against, how can you get a comparison? Everybody, Bayi says it himself, says that he beat me in 3:32.2 at the Commonwealth. Fair enough, I admit that, but when you consider he went into that race with a four-seconds-faster time than I did anyway. . . And I'd never run against the guy, it was something that was a totally new experience . . .

I've sort of been experimenting the last year or so, learning to run from the back and from the front. I'm finding now that I can run from the front and lead all the way, just as well as I can from the back.

T&FN: *Would you really like to have the 1500 record to go with the mile, or do you think the mile still means more to more people?*

Walker: I think the mile will never really fade out. The 3:32.2 is a good record. It's a really hard time.

I think the mile record is a good one now, especially since you have to go through the 1500 in 3:34 to break it. But I'd very much like the 1500 because it's a recognized event, of course.

T&FN: *What's the weakest part of your race? Do you have anything you work on correcting?*

Walker: No, nothing.

T&FN: *Your coach, Arch Jelley, is a big part of your career.*

Walker: Certainly. But it's not just Arch, it's a lot of people. The thing is, *Bible of the Sport*

you've got a coach, you've got parents, your doctor, your friends, your job, your business relationships, everything. They're all a part of an athlete. It's not just one individual. It's a hell of a lot of people that make up an athlete's career. Plus the athlete himself, of course.

T&FN: *What keeps you together in Europe, on these long trips, you don't have your coach, your job . . . ?*

Walker: You know what really keeps us together? The ability to relax. This is the real secret. I feel that Rod and I, we don't need a coach standing over us. We don't need somebody to come and say to us, "Look man, you haven't run your best today, so you've got to get out on the track and run five 400s tomorrow."

We know what to do. After we've run a bad race or a good race. We know how to get ourselves out of a rut and we know how to peak. This is something we learned to do over the last couple of years by experimenting. We know what is right for us as individuals. The right amount of training. The right amount of work to do at the right time. And we know how to go out and relax and have a good time and forget about running until the time is there.

T&FN: *You have said a lot of times, "Rod and I this, Rod and I that," in this interview.*

Walker: I've got to refer to Rod because I'm travelling with him all the time and he's a very good companion to travel with. He's very easy-going and he likes the same things I do and we get along terrifically well. No arguments. We enjoy life.

T&FN: *He was the only one to beat you outdoors last year in a 1500/mile. Do you think if it had been someone else you might have beaten him? A tendency to "let Rod have one"?*

Walker: No, he didn't do that at all. I don't let anybody have anything. He beat me on that night, and that was it.

T&FN: *To finish-off—after Montreal, do you have any visions?*

Walker: We'll just have to see what happens. Win or lose, that's how it goes. I dare say I will just keep on competing. I like athletics.

The right offer from the pros I'd consider turning pro. I have to decide whether I want the money or whether I want to continue in athletics.

I think after the Olympics I'll start stepping up a bit, run the 2000, have a dabble at the 5000. You find after a while that if you keep running 1500s and miles it gets a bit boring. You want to try something else, experiment a bit. Whether you do it well or not is another thing.

T&FN: *Is running such a part of your life now that you'd have trouble quitting?*

Walker: Yeah, I kept telling everybody that I needed a rest. And now that I'm resting I want to run. It's just the competitive instinct in me. I love racing, I really do. I'd race every day if I could take it. I love to race but I hate training. □

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