

by Jon Hendershott

Even if he was endowed with the winged feet of Mercury, would we still be ready for the mercurial rise of John Walker to the heights of world track stardom?

True, in '73 he improved from 1:48.2 in the 800 to a late-season 1:45.3, showed fine potential during a tour at the height of Europe's hectic outdoor campaign, was a member of New Zealand's record 6000 meter relay team and hit a 1500 PR of 3:38.1.

And could even a 1:44.9 two-lapper for the bronze medal in the British Commonwealth Games give any indication of what was to come from the 22-year-old (1/12/52) New Zealander?

Hardly—and yet the handsome young sales clerk from Auckland rushed the quickest last lap in the race (54.4) to finish the second-fastest 1500 meters in history with a simply stunning 3:32.5—behind Filbert Bayi's 3:32.2 global mark. Walker's effort equals 3:49.5 for the mile, six seconds faster than his PR set nine days into 1974.

But in the third major international 1500/mile of his career?

Indeed, for that is precisely what Walker did. Even John admits he couldn't believe his 1500 run—but, then, he is just starting to believe the predictions of his coach.

**T&FN:** Can you pinpoint anything, or combination of things, which has caused your stunning emergence?

**Walker:** A major thing, I think, was the European tour. It gave me a heck of a lot more experience, top racing and more confidence. When I got back home, I rested for only a week and then went into very hard mileage, between 80-100 miles a week. My mileage was consistent and much faster than ever before.

When it came to speed work, instead of cutting my mileage in half or more, I kept in the 90s and actually raced on this as well. I was working for both background and speed.

**T&FN:** Do you consider yourself an 800 runner or 1500 man or equal in both?

**Walker:** I really don't have the basic speed to be a half-miler. Most of the half-milers I race can run 46 in the quarter but my basic speed is around 49. I don't run too many quarters—or 1500s either.

**T&FN:** Why?

**Walker:** I like to believe I can still run the 800. It's a relatively easy event. I'd like to think I can run both, but if I don't have to run too hard, I'll run the 800.

**T&FN:** Before the Commonwealth, were you pointing for one distance over the other?

**Walker:** My main concern was to run a



Chip Kane

good time in the 800. Before I went to Europe my 800 best was 1:48.2; I got down to 1:46.3 in Europe then came home and ran 1:45.3 in late December. That one really broke it open for me. I ran that one from the front and felt quite good. So I thought maybe I could go under 1:45.

Then my coach, Arch Jelley, has said all along I would run these times. I think this has been another factor in my success—because of him. I've been with him for about three years; we work on Lydiard's lines but Arch is willing to modify a training schedule if I'm running badly or if he thinks I'm coming on too quick.

Actually I reached five peaks in '73 and '74—our trials for the Pan-Pacific Games, the Pan-Pacific meet, the European tour, our nationals, and finally the Commonwealth Games. But instead of trying to keep that peak before the Games, he cut my speed work and gave me more mileage. We believed the Games would be run on strength instead of speed.

**T&FN:** Which race do you now consider your stronger event?

**Walker:** If this was my coach talking, he would say the 800 will come faster. He believes the 1500/mile, and eventually the two miles-5000 meters, will be my better distances because I do rely on strength more than speed. But as long as I can run, say, 1:44 in the 800 and keep improving, I'll run the 800.

**T&FN:** How did you rate your chances in the Commonwealth 1500?

**Walker:** I had to win our nationals to make the team because there were four of us good enough to go, myself, Dick Quax,

Rod Dixon and Tony Polhill. So I won the nationals and got the place.

My coach believed the three 800 races would sharpen me for the 1500 just like they did for Peter Snell in Tokyo. And I knew when I raced repeatedly over a period of days, I improved. We were criticized a lot but I have faith in my coach. He can be reassuring all the time because he is confident in what he does but not overconfident. He said, 'You'll be alright.' About two weeks before the team went to camp, he wrote me and told me I would break the world record in the 1500.

**T&FN:** Did you believe him?

**Walker:** No. He had said earlier I would run 3:50 or under for a mile. But now, some of his predictions are starting to come right. He thinks I'll run faster over 800 and I think I can too.

Anyway, after running the 800s and winning my 1500 heat, the question to me was whether I could come out and stick with the pace. I was looking for only about a two second improvement; I thought 3:36 was about it.

**T&FN:** What was your reaction to the race?

**Walker:** After running 3:32, I couldn't believe it. But I was surprised it felt no harder running that fast than running 3:40. There was such a tempo, you could just sit in there and be carried along with the field.

**T&FN:** Did you have any idea the race was that fast while you were running?

**Walker:** Bayi went out quick like everyone expected but he never got the usual distance on the field like in other races. I think this may have been the reason he broke the record: he didn't burn the first lap and ran a more sensible pace.

I didn't get a good start and had to move up every lap. In that class of race, position is very important so if I could run the race again, I would key on Bayi. I was catching him all the time until we got to the tape. I was just so pleased to get second because I wasn't expected to even run for a place. And then the time—well I couldn't believe it.

**T&FN:** What do you see in your future?

**Walker:** I hope to reach my prime by the next Olympics. I've improved steadily in the last three years, running faster each season in the 800 and 1500.

How much faster I can run remains to be seen though. To run fast, you must have top competition and for New Zealanders that means traveling to Europe during our winter and peaking differently than at home. So it's tough.

But my coach has said I can go faster. I don't know how much faster—but I think I can go at least a little bit faster. □