

# Leonel Manzano

by Sieg Lindstrom

Leonel Manzano will head into what promises to be an intriguing USATF 1500 battle (see p. 14) as the reigning U.S. No. 1 miler.

For the Texas alum, who talks about his first two pro seasons using a collegiate class analogy, his “soph” year, ‘10, yielded his first World Ranking. He picked up PRs in the 800 (1:44.56), 1500 (3:32.37) and mile (3:50.64) over a 2-week period in late August. Over the course of the summer, Manzano managed to beat each of the five milers who Ranked ahead of him, auguring well for further progress in the championship seasons of ‘11 and ‘12.

T&FN touched base with the 26-year-old star on the last day of his 5-week April/May altitude training bloc in Albuquerque with coaches John Cook and Ryan Ponsonby and the rest of their elite middle distance group:

**T&FN:** Your Facebook postings of late indicate you’ve been up to some pretty intense training. Four to six hours of work every day at 6500 feet elevation. That’s not all in one session is it?

**Manzano:** It really does vary. Usually when we do six hours it’s two sessions. When we do four, it’s one session. It’s a lot of work and it does take a toll on your body.

We do get to sleep in but we definitely treat this as a job. We’ll start about 9:00 or 9:30 and it will go up to about 12:00 or 1:00. Then we’ll take kind of a break, but when you’ve done a lot of work you definitely want to have time to rest, chill out and bring your mind and your body back.

Then, say probably about 4:00 or 5:00, depending if we’ve had a hard session or not, we’ll do exercises or a light jog.

If it’s been a super-hard session, we’ll usually just rest up and focus more on other things, whether it be our nutrition or taking care of our bodies with massage or ART [active release techniques] or that type of stuff.

We do have a lot of down time but in between workouts we don’t have the energy to be up and around doing a lot of stuff.

After your lunch or breakfast, you’re usually pretty tired from the workouts so you want to rest up. Especially if we have a second session or the previous session was super-hard. Recovery is a huge part of training, as well.

**T&FN:** How do you feel

you’ve evolved as a competitor as you enter your pro “junior year”?

**Manzano:** I’ve always been fortunate enough to have a kick at the end. I think as I grow older, I get a little more confident in the fact that I do have a kick. On top of that I have more confidence in my training.

**T&FN:** You’ve said that impromptu races with your grandfather in Mexico, when you were 4 years old, first started you running. The day you finally beat him was a key event in your career?

**Manzano:** Those were spontaneous things: “Hey, let’s race from here to the tree.” One time my grandfather had broken his leg and I challenged him to a race and, of course, lo and behold, I beat him. That was my first victory and I really remember that particular race.

**T&FN:** You got serious, at least about racing, from 6th grade on. You’ve said your parents weren’t so sure about this running thing, though.

**Manzano:** The area of Mexico where we lived—in the state of Guanajuato—is a very agriculturally based community. It’s a very poor community. Probably within the last 10–15 years they just recently got running water and electricity.

Athletics is looked down upon as a game and as a pastime. When I was growing up in my family and came to the U.S., when I first started running, my parents actually discouraged me from trying to compete: “Hey, what are you doing with all this time? You’re playing around, you’re not doing anything. You should go out and get a job.”

During the summers I would work and still try to find some time to train and run. I actually remember a couple of the kids that I used to run against would be out mowing lawns or something.

Then the next thing you know, probably my sophomore year in high school, I was doing really well. I came back my junior year and I ran 4:06 [1600] and my parents had made me get a job during the school year.

I started working at this Italian restaurant. My junior

## Manzano In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** born September 12, 1984, in Dolores Hidalgo, Mexico; 5-5/126 (1.65/57)

•**Schools:** Marble Falls (Texas) HS ‘04; Texas ‘08; now represents Nike

•**Coach:** Jason Vigilante (college), John Cook & Ryan Ponsonby (pro)

•**PRs:** 800—1:44.56 (‘10); 1000—2:19.73 (‘07); 1500—3:32.37 (‘10); Mile—3:50.64 (‘10); 3000—8:14.59i (‘06)

•**Major Meets:** 1500/Mile—10) NClIn, 1)NC ‘05; 7)NClIn, 4)NC ‘06; 1)NClIn, 2)NC, 2)US 13h) WC ‘07; 1)NClIn, 1)NC, 2)OT, 12s)OG ‘08; 2)US, 12)WC ‘09; 1)USIn, 2)US, 3)CCup ‘10

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** 1500—x, 7 ‘05; x, 9 ‘06; x, 3 ‘07; x, 3 ‘08; x, 3 ‘09; 6, 1 ‘10. 800—x, 3 ‘10



VICTOR SAILER/PHOTO RUN



“We do get to sleep in, but we definitely treat this as a job”

year I ran 4:06, my senior year I ran 4:26. That job took a toll on me. It was kind of hard to keep up with the job, keep up with school and training at the same time and then go out and compete.

I was getting up about 7:00 and starting school about 8:00. Then school would be done, I'd go out to train a little bit and as soon as I was done, I'd head straight to work.

I'd get to work about 4:00 or 5:00 and be at work for another 5 hours until 10:00 or 11:00.

As a kid you get hungry and working at this Italian restaurant had its pros and cons. It was kind of good that I could eat afterwards, but the next thing I knew started gaining weight. I was probably about 10 pounds overweight. I think that's one of the reasons I went from 4:06 to 4:26.

*T&FN: But Texas distance coach Jason Vigilante [now head coach at Virginia] recruited you anyway?*

**Manzano:** This just goes to show how important a coach really is to an athlete. This guy could have given up on me and said, “Hey, we're sorry. We're going somewhere else.” But I guess he really saw something in me that was there; it just needed to be fine-tuned and worked with a little bit. That was my talent for running. It hadn't gone anywhere; it was just under a layer of fat.

So he really started molding me. From the time I was in middle school through high school, I probably went through 5 or 6, maybe even 7, different coaches. I really had no clue about what running really was and what I needed to do. I had no idea about mileage and all this stuff, which was probably an advantage to me.

For me it was more something I did for fun, just did to compete. On occasion, if I wanted to, I'd go out for a run but I wasn't calculating, “Hey, I hit 8 miles today... I hit 10.”

It was more, “I'm going to go out there, I'm going to do my best. Of course, I'm going to try to win and we'll see how it goes.”

*T&FN: Did you have any thought you could, as you did, win an NCAA title your frosh year?*

**Manzano:** I had no idea. I remember we took a cross country trip and we did a workout. It was 4 x 1000 meters and I couldn't finish one. Actually, I finished it but I was whacked after that. I was done. I think I was supposed to run it in 3:00 or 3:10 for 1K, and I couldn't do that.

I somehow ended up finishing up the workout even though it wasn't the best, and we had to cool down for 30–40 minutes. We were running past cornfield after cornfield. My teammates just left

me and I was a good 5, 10 minutes back. At that point, I just kind of felt helpless: “I don't know how I'm going to do this.”

But I was, “I guess I'm here. I'm going to try to keep doing what I've been doing.” It was pretty hard.

My family normally goes into Mexico for Christmas. That year I decided to stay and just train. I trained during Christmas break and just ran what I was supposed to run and when everybody came back for the spring, nobody recognized me because I was super thin. I was

## Life As A Pro Athlete

What does Leonel Manzano like most about being a pro track athlete?

“It's actually a love/hate thing. It's the travel. I love it because you get to see so many things and get to experience all these new and cool different things. And, of course, you're competing at a different level, but the travel has just been amazing. Within the last two or three years I've been to so many places—places where I probably would never have been if it weren't for track & field.

“At the same time, travel and living out of a suitcase for 6 months is not the funnest thing to do.”

Will his family travel to see him in Daegu?

“My family kind of does their own thing. They'd rather watch me on TV, actually. I think if I make it to the Olympics that might be a different story.

“In Beijing my parents had a blast. My dad's a cowboy and he took his cowboy hat out to China. The Chinese were amazed with his hat. They all wanted pictures, and of course my dad was getting all this attention from the Chinese women.

“My mom was kind of on the sidelines and afterwards she'd just give him a big old bump across the chest and say, ‘What are you doing?’ ”

a different guy, no cheeks whatsoever. Then we started racing indoor.

In my first mile ever in college I ran, I guess, a 4:13. Then the following week I came back and ran 4:02.

Coach Vigilante said, “Man, what's your next goal?”

I said, “I'm gonna see if I can break 4:00.”

*T&FN: You did break 4:00, two weeks later when you won the Big 12 title. That must have been memorable.*

**Manzano:** Sure enough, two weeks later we had conference and I just kind of stuck to it. With 400 meters to go, I think we were at 3:01 and with 200 to go I believe it was 3:31.

So in the back of my mind, I was like, “Holy shit, I think I can do this! All I've got to do is run about 27, 28 and that's 4:00 or below.”

I just started kicking. I think the crowd was kind of with me; it seemed they knew what I was trying to do; people were getting out of their seats. I remember just trying to keep pushing.

I came through the finish line. I was right at it but I wasn't sure. There was probably about

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a 10-second delay. I kept looking at the clock, kept looking at the clock, and all of a sudden, I heard the crowd go, "Whoa!" It said 3:59.8 or something.

My teammates went berserk. They came over and they threw me in the air and all that. "Wow! I thought, this is pretty intense."

I guess it was all that work, all that sacrifice,

**Manzano:** Believe it or not, Mexico did try to recruit me. It was probably in high school, and I went down to Mexico and I met a couple of the athletes down there. But what I tell people is my roots are in Mexico but the U.S. is my home.

This country's provided me with many opportunities that otherwise I wouldn't have had. I could tell you that if I had grown up in Mexico there is just no way in the world that I'd be doing what I'm doing now. I couldn't tell you where I'd be.

and the 2-mile more at first, because I knew that I could push harder within the last lap. I knew that I was making a lot of people kind of hurt; I knew they couldn't stay with me. For some reason, I just really liked that feeling of making people hurt.

I thought, "Wow, this is fun." I just really liked the fact that I may be a little tougher than these guys.

I think that's something that's always kind of stuck in with me: "OK, let's go." But then later it kind of changed. The feeling of having

that kick has kind of grown on me, and I guess just the feeling where you literally have 150 meters to go in the race and there are probably 2 or 3 guys in front of you. It's like in your mind something just clicks and, "Hey, it's time to go." Then it's like putting it in fourth or fifth gear and you're going. Then there's that feeling of going right by them. It's pretty good.

**T&FN:** Do you still get really nervous before big races?

**Manzano:** No, I think that's gone away now. The first year and at the beginning of the second year that was kind of how it was. I don't think I really grasped it but now that's starting to really change.

I think that as you mature—not only me but as a runner generally—things start coming into perspective. I think that's one of the things that's really started to change for me.

**T&FN:** How do you prepare mentally for a big race?

**Manzano:** You definitely have to go through it in your head about once or twice, maybe even three times. Then after that you've got to let it go. You've just got to run.

You've already done the work. If you've done the work then there's no need to worry. You've already done the work, you've put in the time. Why stress yourself? □



Manzano and Lomong have had great stretch battles at the last 3 Nationals

KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

I had put in during that Christmas time.

**T&FN:** You were on your way then. Winning the NCAA title as a frosh made that clear. Obviously by then your parents must have been coming around on running?

**Manzano:** Probably after my junior year in high school they started noticing I was getting all these college letters and people started telling them, "Hey, if he does well he can go to college, he can go do something else, he can get out of here."

They started thinking, "Hey, maybe this might work." But even in college, I'm the first person in my family ever to graduate from high school, first person ever to graduate from college, and the first person to ever really run track. So I think for them there were really a lot of unknowns out there.

Even now, but in college it was like, "Well, he's not really making any money." That's kind of more their thought: "It doesn't seem like he's working but I guess he might have a future."

Now they're starting to realize how important it really was.

**T&FN:** Did you ever consider representing Mexico?

Of course, I did have to work really hard to get where I am. I'm still working. I don't see myself as being very high or anything. I think there's a lot of work still to be done. I think we can still improve and keep getting better.

**T&FN:** What appealed to you about running and racing when you first started?

**Manzano:** At first, I think I enjoyed the mile,

## Manzano Has A Philanthropic Side

Seeking to pay forward the rewards he has reaped in the sport, Leonel Manzano began working on running-oriented charitable initiatives for area kids last fall.

"It's about giving kids an opportunity to have the same benefits that I had in track & field of being fit, being healthy, being able to have some running shoes," he explains. "Growing up, my running shoes were my old school shoes and my first pair were actually hiking boots. So it's about giving kids that don't have the same opportunities as me that opportunity. There's just something about it that I really, really enjoy."

"Why not start giving back where it first started? That was in the Marble Falls/Austin area. So last fall I had a 5K and all the proceeds went to a little track group that I helped start as I was coming out of high school, The Highland Lakes Track Club. They're all kids from 5-18."

"With the Manzano Mile [a youth race held for the first time in March] we're working with the River City Youth Foundation in Austin. It's an impoverished area and it's kind of hard for kids to see what's really out there. And I really think that track & field can be a great combination for them. Even if we have one or two kids that come out and say, 'This is what I want to do,' I think that would be awesome."