

MARK BELGER

T&FN Interview by Tom Jordan

Everything he does is enthusiastic," a friend of Mark Belger's explains. "He's tough, intense, dedicated, and happy-go-lucky, all at the same time." That's a lot of adjectives to pack into one medium-sized 20-year-old, but listening to Belger talk of his life as a track prodigy, they sound both accurate, and too few.

His voice is accented with reminders of his growing-up years in Bellmore, N.Y., 30 miles from New York City, out on "the Island." It is filled with an irrepressible excitement that at times borders on breathlessness. Which is just, as Mark has been in a hurry since his days as an age-group world recordholder in the half-mile.

Hauling his three state 880 titles off to Villanova, Belger continued his improvement, breaking 1:50 for the first time (1:47.1) in the International Freedom Games the same day Filbert Bayi set his mile world record. Then last year, Belger followed up a third in the NCAA with a surprise 4th in the Olympic Trials, missing the team by 0.09.

A high hamstring pull ruined his cross country season for this, his junior year, and he bloated up from his normal 150 to 165 pounds: "I felt like a fish." Undismayed, Belger came back with zest undercover, going unbeaten in 5 major half-mile races, including the NCAA, won in an indoor PR 1:49.2.

T&FN: You really had a consistent indoor season; none of your half-miles varied more than a second-and-a-half.

Belger: Yeah, I know. That was the best part of it. I was pretty stable, I was continuous. What I attribute it to is that I know how to run the turns and keep the same pace. I never went out faster than 55 for any of those races, except the NCAA's. I went 53-point for that one. Usually it was 55-55.

T&FN: You beat a lot of good people indoors, like Enyeart, and Boit in the Olympic Invitational.

Belger: Yeah, I was psyched in that race, really psyched. I like to go into my races really confident, and I was ready to run. I saw Boit staggering a bit around one turn, with about a lap-and-a-half to go. So going around the turn, I got ready and made my move and just hoped that I could hold on.

T&FN: You also beat Carlo Grippio twice, and he went on and set the indoor 800 record in Europe.

Belger: Yeah, that ticked me off. I wish he had been in shape when I ran against him.

You know, in America, everybody likes to sit and kick. They get off on that last lap kick and stuff. I kinda think the



Jeff Johnson

Africans know where it's at, as far as just going out and running. I'd rather see somebody go out who has trained to get the time down and really looks good doing it... not just sit in the pack and kick—that's just an easy way to win.

T&FN: You want to be a frontrunner, then?

Belger: I don't know if I have the confidence. I'd like to run from the front, but first I have to win the race, you know, running for Villanova. The way I look at it, the times will come sooner or later.

T&FN: How do you feel your basic speed is?

Belger: Well, not very good. I haven't broken 48 seconds for the quarter. So when I'm on the line and I'm running against guys who have run 44 and 45... it doesn't bother me, because it's two laps, not just one. But if I start getting outkicked... This year I'm going to work on speed.

T&FN: What race do you think will be your best? Is it the 1500?

Belger: It's hard to say. My PR in the mile so far is 4:05, and I ran that indoors last year. I think I'm capable of going under 4:00. How far under 4:00, I don't know. Let me put it this way: we have a pretty good school record to try and break here—3:53.3 by Eamonn Coghlan. That's worth shooting for.

Right now, I'm pointing toward this half-mile race I've got down in Kingston. Supposedly Juantorena and Mike Boit are in the race. I've got to get ready for that race. I can't fool around. If I'm going to be running against those guys, I want to make a good showing. Get my chance to get up there and be one of the best.

T&FN: You've been the best in your age group for a long time. It seems like you've been around forever.

Belger: Yeah, the first time I stepped out on a track in the 7th grade, I freaked out the coach. I just stepped out there in a pair of gray shorts and PF Flyers and I went 63.3. "Ah, it was great, great!" said the coach. All I knew was that it hurt. So I trained for about a month, went out with a brand new pair of spikes, a new uniform on... I ran 63.4.

T&FN: How do you view your own talent now? Can you be one of the best in the world?

Belger: Ummm... I don't know. I'm just thankful to God for giving me the talent so I could go out and run against the best.

You know, I was just reading something about Juantorena in the 1972 Olympics, and he was running alright, but he wasn't that good. Four years later, he was great. So it takes time to develop, and I'm willing to put in all the work. So if I deserve it, I'm going to get it.

T&FN: You won't stop running after graduation then?

Belger: Oh, no, I have no plans for that. Like right now, I have long term plans to make the next Olympics: I don't know if it's going to be 1500 meters, 800 meters or what. Some people like to double in the Olympics—I'd like to try that.

T&FN: Was making the Olympic team last year a big goal?

Belger: It was nice. But now that I didn't make it, I'm almost glad that I didn't. It was a goal, a really, really big goal.

It's funny, the day before I left for the Trials, I walked over to Jumbo [Elliott, his coach] and said, you know, I'm ready to go out, and I'm going to try my best, and he said, "Okay, yeah, don't be too discouraged if you don't make it or anything. You know, you're going to be the slowest half-miler out there." And I go, "What!?" and he says "Remember, you have to go easy; just run even quarters and keep on going."

He was giving me strategy. "If you catch rig, just keep using your arms and keep going." And that's what I did: caught rig, and I tried to keep going, but it ended up just missing out on it.

T&FN: Not by much, though.

Belger: It was cool. I ran my best—what can I say? Three good races. I

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was impressed that I was able to last that last 100 yards the way I did. The way my body felt, it felt like I couldn't move.

T&FN: *What other interests do you have, away from track?*

Belger: I'm just like a regular guy, walking around in blue jeans and sneakers. I'm a marketing major. I'm getting into little things like photography. I like not to be centered around my major, though. Like, I'm taking nutrition courses, and creative writing courses... getting the most out of my scholarship.

T&FN: *What's your view of foreign athletes competing for a U.S. college?*

Belger: Ummm, sometimes it seems unfair, but I think they show the Americans how to run a little bit differently. If everybody is just screwing around in the back of the pack, the records will never get broken. I like their tactics. I like their tactics a lot.

One thing I don't like about it, stories that I've heard... how can I put this? I have heard that some of the athletes, especially from Africa, practically need interpreters. And if that's true, I really don't dig that at all. I don't think they deserve to be there.

T&FN: *Is there anybody you try and emulate in track?*

Belger: You know who I look up to? I look up to the 5-minute milers. Because they don't get any of the good things I get. They're out there running just as hard. They're the guys with guts, the guys with a lot of inner determination...

T&FN: *If there was one person you could beat in a race, who would it be?*

Belger [laughs]: What kind of question is that? Well, actually, it wouldn't be one guy; it would have to be a race with 2 or 3 good guys, like that race down in Jamaica. I'd like to win that race for prestige.

T&FN: *Do you like the fame?*

Belger: Ah, yes and no. It's great when you do it once, but then you have to do it a second and third time. You are only as famous as your last race. Most of the time, I have a hard time convincing people I even run.

T&FN: *Why is that?*

Belger: As a rule, I don't hang around with a lot of track people. I slept out on the sidewalk with friends one night to buy tickets to a Grateful Dead concert. If anybody knew that I held any of these age group world records or relay world records, they would just scratch their heads in wonder, I suppose. But that's just me—I like to go out and enjoy myself. You only live once.

T&FN: *Who do you think are the best runners today?*

Belger: Weird, talking about track. Ummm, umm, I'm not really into sports too much. I like 'em all: I like John Walker, I like Eamonn, I like Boit. The people I know, I really respect.

T&FN: *You sound like track is not a major part of your life?*

Belger: Track is a way of life. You

have to train 365 days a year. And it fills up my free time, which is good, because I'd be getting into a lot of trouble if I weren't.

T&FN: *What do you do when you have time off from running?*

Belger: Alright, I had three weeks off in the summer, and I hitched up to Montreal and lived with a French Canadian family. Watching the Olympics, having picnics, watching the crew races, going to the cafes, having just a real good time.

T&FN: *Did you see the 800 final?*

Belger: No, as a matter of fact, I missed it.

T&FN: *How come?*

Belger: I was staying with this family,

and they had this daughter. And she had off in the afternoons, so we went to the Chinatown. Bad timing. I like to see the people I run against at least once before I race them, and I've still never seen Juantorena run.

T&FN: *He's impressive. Good luck against him if the race comes off.*

Belger: Yeah, thanks... This guy—he's 6-2 and weighs 185 pounds. I'm 5-11 and 150! Like I said before, I like to go into a race beating my chest and feeling great. Then you have to stand next to somebody like that, and you get second thoughts. That's why I'm starting now, to get psyched; really, really psyched. □

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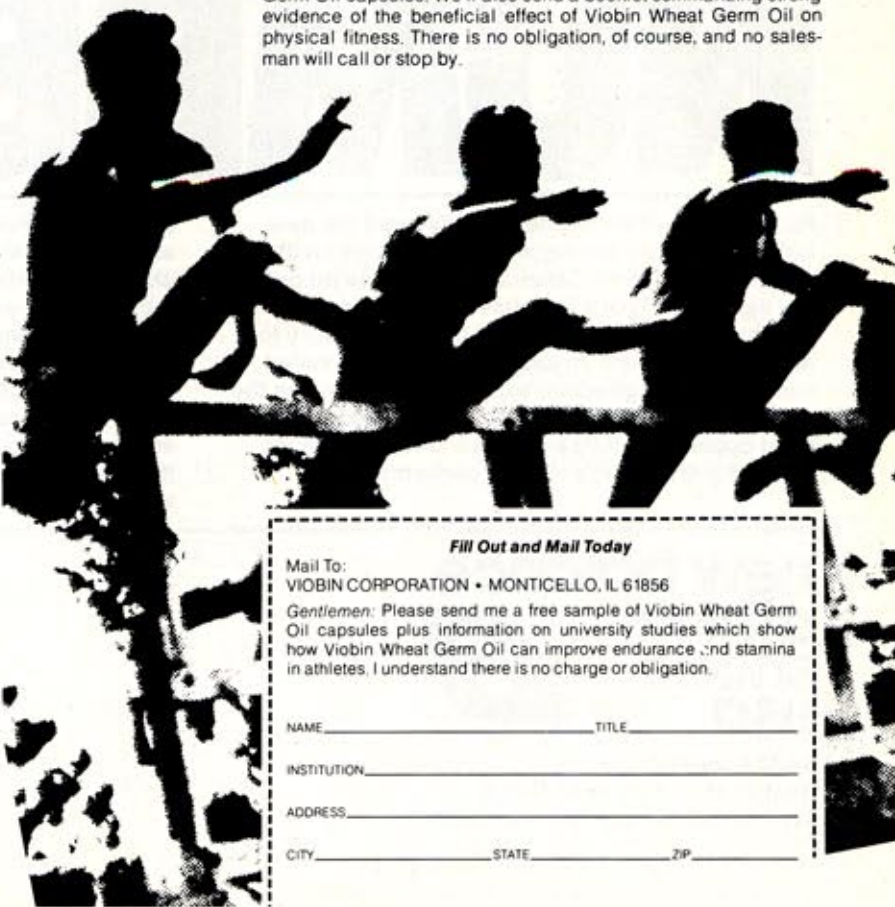
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