

T&FN INTERVIEW

NOUREDDINE MORCELI

by JON HENDERSHOTT

Twice in the '80s, thanks to the exploits of Saïd Aouita, North Africa claimed the world's top-ranked 1500-mile runner, the Moroccan rating No. 1 globally in both '84 and '87.

The '90s began with the region again producing the owner of the coveted title of "the world's best miler." But this time, he hails from Morocco's larger eastern neighbor, Algeria.

Noureddine Morceli ran the fastest 1500 of 1990, beat all his major rivals and won the Grand Prix event title—all before his 21st birthday.

He emerged last year while attending college, but not in France or Italy, as many North Africans do. Rather, it was in the unlikely setting of Riverside CC in Southern California, where he was guided by veteran coach Ted Banks. At home, Morceli's mentor is none other than older brother Abderrahme—who rated as the world's No. 7 miler back in '77.

There is very much a "team" feeling to Morceli, not only with his brother's coaching but in the presence of manager Amar Brahmia, a 1:45.81 man himself in the late '70s. It is clear, after even a few minutes of conversation, that "team Morceli" definitely is on a march toward greatness.

Morceli is soft-spoken, but absolutely confident in his abilities and where those talents can take him. Sharing his thoughts with us in a bustling hotel lobby at the Millrose Games, Morceli sounded positively excited about reaching his journey's ultimate destination:

T&FN: You once said there is a natural rivalry between Moroccans and Algerians, and you felt Algerians were happy that one of their countrymen now could challenge the Moroccans.

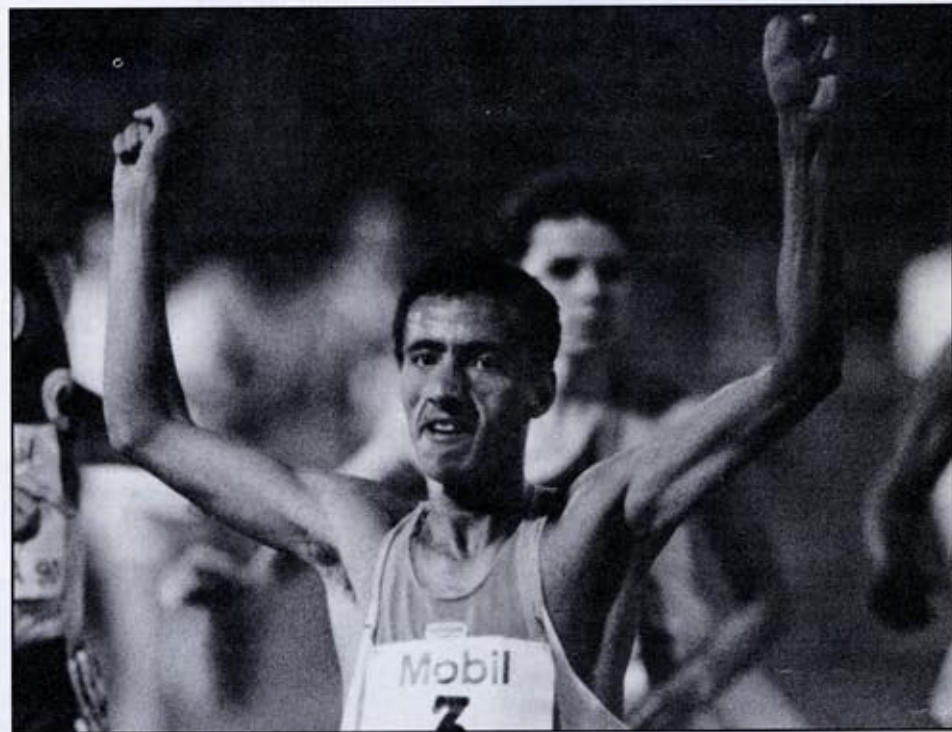
Morceli: Yes, that's true. I know that all the people of Algeria are waiting for the moment when I meet Aouita. They really want to see what happens. It doesn't matter that Aouita has become more of a 5000/10,000 runner, while I am still a miler. I know it will be great.

T&FN: What has been the reaction at home that the world's No. 1 miler now comes from Algeria, rather than Morocco?

Morceli: Everyone was happy last

summer with my racing, and now they are extremely pleased I have been ranked No. 1 in the world.

For me, it is a way to push the younger athletes in Algeria to train hard, to prove themselves and maybe become like me.



ALLSPORT/Mike Powell

T&FN: Do you feel a lot of pressure from the people back home, expectations to always win, always run fast, that sort of thing?

Morceli: Oh yes. I think it's the same in Morocco: the people there always want Saïd Aouita to prove himself, and it is the same thing with Algerians.

T&FN: Has it been better for you to be in school in California rather than living and training at home, where people could watch you constantly?

Morceli: Yes, but it's also a little hard to be so far away from home. You miss your family, your home. It is difficult sometimes.

But to become a champion, you have to become brave and sometimes that means going out on your own.

T&FN: If you had stayed at home to train, do you feel you might have reached this same level?

Morceli: Not really. Maybe 3:34 or so, but not 3:32. The main difference between Algeria and elsewhere is in the approach to training, which isn't so hard.

T&FN: You said you became interested in running because of your older brother. Did you want to be like him?

Morceli: Yes, when I was young. I hoped to become like him; go to Europe to race and things like that. Then when Aouita really showed his ability, I wanted to be like him.

When I saw athletes from Morocco—Arab athletes—do so well, it inspired me; pushed me to want to do as well or

better. Now I know I can provide that kind of example for young Arabs.

T&FN: In just one year, you became very famous. Do you feel you must be that example to younger athletes, or do you just try to be yourself?

Morceli: I just try to be myself. But I also know that people look up to me now. Algeria never had a champion before, so naturally I will be a model, especially for the young. But it isn't a problem; I just stay who I am.

T&FN: When you go into any race, what is your aim: to run a certain time, just to win, what?

Morceli: To win. To prove myself. Then to bring my time down. Also I want to gain experience that will help me in

the biggest meets, like the Olympics and World Championships. In those meets, the first thing to do is win the title.

T&FN: *Amar, what do you feel are Nouredine's strongest points as a runner?*

Brahmia: Physically, he has great endurance, yet also excellent speed. He might not look fast when you see him run, but if you time him—especially over the last lap of a race—he is quite fast.

On the other side, psychologically he is very strong, too. He truly believes he can run 3:28. When he feels he can win a certain race, he does it. He's never afraid.

T&FN: *As the 1990 season progressed, he kept winning the big races, essentially convincing himself he could, in fact, beat anyone. Nouredine, have you always had this tremendous self-confidence as a runner?*

Morceli: Oh yes. If you want to become a champion, you have to trust in yourself. You must totally believe you can do something. If you don't, you will never be a champion.

From the age of about 15, I just felt the confidence that I could become a top runner, and especially when I saw Aouita set World Records. Last year I proved to myself exactly what I could do.

Brahmia: But things will be more difficult this season because there will not be any surprises. Everyone knows that Morceli is... Morceli.

But there is a difference between Morceli and, say, Aouita: Aouita always says out to the public, "I can break this World Record" or "I can win this race." Morceli never says that—but both believe absolutely that they can do these things.

That strong belief in yourself is vital—because it can be the difference today between an athlete being just "good" and being a champion. Athletes today all train very hard, all at a high level. There are no "secrets" now for clean athletes.

T&FN: *You're saying that, at the very top, physical abilities are virtually identical. So it is the mental that makes the difference?*

Brahmia: Absolutely. That is the "plus" for the athlete who believes so strongly, "I can do these things."

Last summer, standing at the starting line were such runners as Morceli, Cram, Elliott, Di Napoli, Herold. You couldn't pick one as the best, physically. But Morceli looked at them and told me, "It's OK, I can beat all of them. I will win." That mental drive is the difference.

T&FN: *There is a strong "team" sense in your comments: you the athlete, your brother the coach and Amar the manager all working*

Aouita A Big Morceli Booster

Millrose's Wanamaker Mile was Nouredine Morceli's first competitive effort after returning from three weeks of altitude training in Mexico City.

And with whom did he spend some time south of the border? Chap by the name of Saïd Aouita.

Morceli relates, "After I won the Nice Grand Prix meet last summer, Aouita told French television, 'I was the runner for the '80s; Morceli will be the runner for the '90s.' It was just great to have someone like him say that about me.

"Then just three nights ago in Mexico, he invited us to dinner and told me, 'You are the only one who can break my World Record in the 1500.' I was amazed."

Was this the same Aouita who often has brashly claimed to the world press that only he is capable of setting World Records?

very closely together. Is it ever a difficult situation to be coached by your brother?

Morceli: Oh no. I follow his examples because he has experienced a great deal.

Brahmia: Plus, Morceli has learned much from Ted Banks, too. He has been very important. But we always have tried to keep our minds open and learn from everyone.

T&FN: *Of course, for 1991, the World Championships are your main goal.*

Morceli: Yes, both the indoor and outdoor World Championships. As I said, it is important to win those titles.

But also this year, I want to run some 800s seriously. I feel I can run in the low 1:44s, or even the 1:43s. I won't give up totally on the 5000, either. I may run a few, just to try to bring my time down.

The 800 is good for speed in the 1500, but so is the 5000 because it gives you the strength to be able to run fast in the 1500.

Brahmia: If Morceli runs the 800, his times will be a great surprise. Last year, he had no time to run the 800 because we aimed at the 1500 in the Grand Prix.

But this year, to prepare for the World Championships 1500, it's important to run some very fast 800s. I feel Aouita waited too long to run the 800; he was 28 in '88 when he tried it seriously. But Morceli is not yet 21.

It's important background to run fast in the 800. If a runner wants to run 3:28 for 1500, he must run a 1:42-1:43 800 beforehand. The speed is so important, even for the 5000—Aouita knew he had

"This is the other side of Aouita; the great runner but also the great man," says Morceli. "He said to me, 'You can do these things.'"

"It showed the human side of Aouita, not just the mechanical man as an athlete. It is a side he rarely shows.

"He even had videotapes of my races in Europe. He had studied them, watched my technique, timed my splits, noted my good points and my mistakes.

"Then he told me, 'Morceli, you have great talent. You can be the one to break my records—and very soon.'"

Morceli himself owns a quiet confidence in his ability to set records. Under-scoring that belief was his reflection on his inaugural experience with altitude training: "Since it was my first time, it was hard—but I learned I could do it. It will make me a very tough athlete." /JH/

to run a 3:29 1500 before he could do 12:58 for 5000.

T&FN: *So you do think about records?*

Morceli: Yes, but it is also important that an athlete not set just one record and then disappear. It's important to me to be at the top level for many years. That is the mark of a true champion.

Brahmia: We also know that this is the time to do those great things. It isn't right to just talk about doing great times. It is better to first run them, then talk. It isn't good to just talk about an idea; you must work very hard to transform the idea into action.

Sure, it's important to run times like a 3:28 1500 or a 3:45 mile, because of financial reasons. But more important, they are monumental times; they are important for history, for the way that runner will be remembered. I hope that runner will be Morceli.

Nouredine Morceli (pronounced NOOR-den MORE-sellee) was born February 20, 1970, and is 5-7³/₄/137. He competed for Riverside JC in '89 & '90, but has chosen not to compete for an NCAA school.

PRs: 800—1:48.27 '88; 1500—3:32.60 '90; Mile—3:53.06 '90; 3000—7:44.80 '90; 5000—13:25.20 '90.

Major Meets: 1500—2)WJ '88; 1)GP Final '90.

Progression (World Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	1500	3000	5000
1987	17	1:52.0 800	—	—
1988	18	3:40.41	8:02.8	—
1989	19	3:37.87	—	13:56.25
1990	20	3:32.60 (1)	7:44.80	13:25.20