

T&FN Interview

by Tom Jordan

PETER SNELL

Physically, there has been little change: The lines around the eyes are a little deeper, the hair a little longer, sideburns fuller. Peter Snell at 35 is still at racing weight (5-10½/175) and still has the physique of a textbook mesomorph. He looks every inch the winner of three Olympic gold medals, holder of seven world records from 800m (1:44.3) to the mile (3:54.1), and T&FN's Athlete of the Sixties.

But 10 years after his stunning 800/1500 double in Tokyo there have been changes in the lifestyle of the man many consider the finest middle distance runner in history.

Comfortably married, father of two girls, Snell quit his job as director of a sports foundation in New Zealand, sold his house and possessions and moved his family to the US last July to study exercise physiology and psychology at the University of California at Davis. Now an atypical freshman, Snell talks about his career and future with the objectivity of a private, introspective man given to frankness:

T&FN: How tough was the Tokyo double?

Snell: It really wasn't that tough. It was just challenging enough to make it really enjoyable. There was anxiety, sure, because the thought was, "Am I really trying to do too much?" Was I being too greedy? The 800 is difficult; you just can't make mistakes, I've always thought. Although I see that Wottle survived the 800 with bad tactics, but didn't survive the 1500.

T&FN: Do you feel any different today physically than you did 10 years ago?

Snell: Not really any different. In fact my oxygen uptake is about the same as 10 years ago. I weigh roughly the same—the same weight, but fatter. As one ages, I don't think you lose your ability to run fast as much as you lose your flexibility. Oddly enough, I just talked about this with Murray Halberg recently. He was saying he wasn't running much anymore, because he gets sore tendons whenever he goes out. I do static stretching exercises before I run.

T&FN: You do still run, then?

Snell: Yes, I've been running quite a bit here, actually; 4-5 miles every other day and perhaps 10 miles over the weekend.

T&FN: What runners impress you today?

Snell: I think my favorite is Ben Jipcho: in fact, all the Kenyans. I saw John Kipkurgat win the 800m in Christchurch and it just looked so effortless, and he did it leading all the way, which is something I really appreciated. I could never have done an 800 like that, leading all the way. And he's 29, isn't he . . . no spring chicken.

Let's see, Americans . . .

T&FN: The long pause tells all.

Snell: No, now don't read anything into that. Rick Wohlhuter was whom I was visualizing. The trouble with Rick is that he came down to New Zealand and ran so

badly that I thought; "Oh hell, how can this guy run?" I even had a training session with him and he didn't seem to be that strong. How the hell he came over here and ran the times he did, I'll never know. I am greatly impressed by him. He just doesn't seem to be putting any effort in at all when he runs the 800.

T&FN: Did you?

Snell: Yeah, I was working. I was cruising in a mile race, but in an 800, I was working all the way. Oh, the first lap was never that bad, but after that I really had to work.

T&FN: Were you capable of going under 3:50 in the mile?

Snell: I'm on record as saying that, way back. I revised my opinion after having a go at it in 1964 and only running 3:54.1.

T&FN: What's the best way to run a sub-3:50 mile?

Snell: Run at the most efficient "cruising" speed and retain the ability to turn on that last lap. For me, cruising speed seemed to be 60, 60, 60, then 54. For today's great runners, it might be 59's. This is why what Bayi does makes no sense to me, with his crazy pace.

T&FN: How would you have run him in your peak form?

Snell: I have the feeling that if I were racing Bayi and were really keyed up, I would end up following him without realizing it was so fast. When someone of ability throws out a challenge like that, it becomes a more direct conflict, and I would try to beat him at his own game and stick with him.

But this is really academic, isn't it? Bayi is running 3:32 and I was 3:37. Five seconds is just . . .

T&FN: What are your impressions of Jim Ryun?

Snell: They've changed quite a bit. When his book came out with his statement that I snubbed him in Los Angeles in '65, I was a little irritated with his misinterpretation of my actions. But I've really got around to the stage of feeling a little sorry for him because he appears to be someone who, in spite of being so outstanding, appears to have got so little in so many ways. He's now going through the painful period of being written off, and I felt that a little bit in my own career.

T&FN: What are the ultimates in the 800m/mile?

Snell: It's only a guess. If I were asked to pick the records in 1984, I'd say 3:48 for the mile and something approaching 1:41 in the 800. But "ultimates," how do you arrive at whatever times you pick?

T&FN: How conscious are you of being one of the greatest athletes of all time?

Snell: Well, if it weren't for

Americans, I wouldn't be that conscious of it. Here, you seem to be more aware of "all-time greats," as you call them.

This is interesting. Over here, I might be introduced by someone, and he'll say, "This is Peter Snell, and by the way he won at the Olympics," and I can see that I've shot up in the eyes of the person I'm meeting. Whereas the tendency in New Zealand is for people to say, "So you were a good runner. What else can you do?" They like to knock you down a peg.

T&FN: What are your impressions of the US?

Snell: This is a little paradise as far as I'm concerned. My work is challenging, exciting, and so on. I'm really not sampling American life, though. I'm sort of up in a little ivory tower, of necessity really. I feel very grateful to have the opportunity to be here. I'm surrounded by enthusiastic people. It's terrific. Trouble is, I'm not making any money, just spending it.

T&FN: Your studies seem to be directed towards a coaching career.

Snell: Not really. Basically my objections to coaching are that I'm not prepared to become a second father. With a little bit of maturity, this is really what I appreciate about Arthur Lydiard, because this is what he was to a lot of New Zealand runners. I prefer to deal with people on a more superficial level, rather than getting too deeply involved.

T&FN: Do you miss the adulation?

Snell: No, because that equals pressure to perform, to produce. The fame can assist you in many ways, getting into here for example. That gets you so far, but from then on you've got to produce on your own merits. If you capitalize too much on your name, you forget that you've got to keep grinding away at it. It's a bit like the great natural athlete as a teenager compared with the guy without too much natural ability: That guy has to learn the important psychological qualities of dedication, and he ultimately overtakes the natural athlete who has had it easy all his life. There's a bit of a parallel there with my case.

T&FN: So do you feel that you've wasted the years after your retirement?

Snell: Yes. Let me put it this way: It's taken me this time to realize I want to do what I am doing now. I'm interested in studying the "driving forces" of the high achiever—they are a source of fascination to me. What causes people to want to achieve so much? Why do they have to keep proving themselves?

T&FN: How would you answer that for yourself?

Snell: That's a leading question. I have my theories, but I think I will keep them to myself. □