

1974 Athlete of the Year

RICK WOHLHUTER

Interviewed by Garry Hill

Wohlhuter isn't exactly a common name—but then, Rick Wohlhuter is no common athlete. In fact, he stands out above all others for 1974, being given a clear mandate in our international panel of experts' voting for Athlete of the Year (see pp. 4-5).

The credentials are impeccable:

- **800m/880y**—Ranked first in the world; undefeated; world record at 880 (1:44.1) for best two-laps ever; three American records at 800 (1:44.1, 1:43.9, 1:43.9); four of the top five times of the year, all ranking in the top seven ever.

- **1000m**—One race, but a dandy 2:13.9 world record, worth a Portuguese 1:43.3 for 800.

- **1500m/Mile**—Ranked fifth in the world; undefeated; 3:54.4 PR in beating John Walker and Rod Dixon.

- Overall, that's an undefeated outdoor season against the best competition the world had to offer, with a total of two world records and five American.

Also not common was Rick's loss of the 800 record for the second year in a row—both due to meet mismanagement. Just as at Vons in 1973, the Hayward Restoration meet didn't have a tape at the shorter distance as Wohlhuter swept to a significant 880 mark.

The only blotch on his entire year, indoors and out, was an off-distance 600y indoors in January; that in a meet in which he thought he was coming to run the 880. But the Athlete of the Year is chosen for his outdoor deeds only. There, There, he reigns supreme.

T&FN: Let's talk about 1974. At one time, you were sort of known as an indoor runner, but you didn't run much indoors the past couple of years. Would you consider yourself a better indoor runner?

Wohlhuter: I certainly don't consider myself a better indoor runner, at least not of late. I started out better indoors because I injured my foot at the beginning of the outdoor season in both my junior and senior years, which kind of hurt me and kept my progression outdoors quite limited.

T&FN: What do you use the indoor season for now?

Wohlhuter: Now I use it for fun and games I guess. I enjoy the travel and I enjoy racing. It more or less gives me something to do in anticipation of the outdoor season.

T&FN: Are you ever going for fast times or records?

Wohlhuter: Well, if I ever get a fast time or a record, it certainly wasn't planned, indoors anyway. I like to keep it kind of low-key. If I win, fine. If I run fast,

fine. If not, OK, no pressure.

T&FN: OK, getting rid of the indoor season, before you ran outdoors at all, you didn't do anything competitively for six weeks or so.

Wohlhuter: That's my usual pattern. During this time, March, I concentrate more on a little bit longer distance, a little more interval work. I more or less hide out and get my training back in line so I'm ready to go by mid-April. The weather's a bit inclement at that time so I have no real choice but to concentrate on training rather than racing.

T&FN: Do you think the nasty weather helps? That is, if you were in California, would peaking later in the year be more difficult? Would you get into shape too easily?

Wohlhuter: Definitely. I probably would run worse. I'm so accustomed to the system I have set up now and I know exactly when I'll be ready to really concentrate on a good time. Good weather would probably throw me helter-skelter.

T&FN: How long can you maintain shape at a really-competitive international level?

Wohlhuter: That's hard to answer. I have run close to it from the middle of May to the beginning of August. There's three months or so. I'd guess that's pretty much my limit. But this isn't running weekend-in and weekend-out. Perhaps every two weeks or so.

T&FN: After a notable indoor season following the world 880 record outdoors in '73, did you go into the '74 outdoor season with records on your mind much?

Wohlhuter: I guess in part I did. I wanted to better my half-mile record, but I was more or less after the 800 record. I felt that if you have one you should have the other. I wanted that as far as records go, but I had other objectives too.

T&FN: Your first really significant race was the 3:55.1 mile at the USTFF. That was a pretty big improvement, and surprising to a lot of people.

Wohlhuter: That was a significant; maybe even a turning point for me. At the time, I knew I could run a good half-mile, but to keep my interest up, which I knew was important to continue running at the level I had been, I knew I had to change my

objectives, in part anyway. I felt that I had done enough in the half and there wasn't really a whole lot more I could do other than win all my races. That's a difficult thing in itself, no matter how good you are.

So I was interested in terms of the mile. I had broken 4:00 before and I wanted to kind of give it a shot—flex my muscles a bit. I hopped into that race and led it from start to finish as it turned out, and the time was just about what I had hoped to achieve. I felt from that, that in time I could turn to the mile and compete effectively against, well, any runner I suppose.

T&FN: You had run the Olympic Trials at Eugene, so you knew how fast their track was. Were you looking forward to running a half there?

Wohlhuter: Yes I was. I was looking for a place to open up. I knew about the time period (especially after the mile the week before) I was ready to go. I had, of course, the record in the back of my mind—no, I had it in the front of my mind. I just wanted to kind of give it a shot.

T&FN: You had a nice rabbit at Eugene. Does that make it easier for you?

Wohlhuter: I wasn't so sure after the race was over, because he got a little too far ahead of me at one point and I was kind of playing catch-up. Even though I had the first 440 exactly as I wanted, I felt like, Christ, I kind of had to put out to get it. But I think it helps. It settles your mind as much as anything. To know that you don't have to carry the burden 100% yourself. Physically, I think you're still going to put out as much effort.

T&FN: Going into the AAU, did you have any worries with what would be the toughest American field you would have to face? Did you entertain any thoughts that you might lose?

Wohlhuter: No, I felt quite confident. I'd been running quite well, and I'd already run a good half and mile, training was going good. The weather was turning good. I had no reason to assume that I was going to run poorly.

T&FN: Were you surprised at the good US depth with young guys like the Robinsons [James and Mark] and Francis [Keith] behind you all of a sudden?

Wohlhuter: I knew some of them had run pretty well, but hadn't faced any good

competition enough with a tempo, a pace swift enough to give them a good time. I wasn't really surprised to see the times that came out of the race.

T&FN: *One of the guys you beat here, of course, was John Walker. He beat you in a slow tactical race in New Zealand in early '73. You lost three times that year, and that avenged one of them. You'd already beaten Mike Boit at Drake, where he beat you the year before, so that left Yevgeniy Arzhanov. At that time, I assume you imagined he'd be at the US-USSR meet in Durham and were looking forward to knocking him off.*

Wohlhuter: I was waiting for him. I knew the track at Durham was exceptional, much like Eugene's, and I knew the weather was good and I was set to go. As it turned out, he wasn't. But I still pushed the pace enough to show him that I was capable of it.

T&FN: *When he beat you at Minsk in '73, he burned you in the last 50 or so.*

Wohlhuter: Yeah, it was a tactical race, and I kind of got on the short end of it.

T&FN: *He must be pretty fast then, because you have pretty good basic speed.*

Wohlhuter: I do, good speed I guess, good enough.

T&FN: *Didn't you start as sprinter in high school?*

Wohlhuter: Yeah, I started with the 100 and 220, and long jump. Then I sort of moved to the quarter, and I eventually moved to the half.

T&FN: *You ran well at Durham, though, even though Arzhanov didn't show.*

Wohlhuter: I thought the best tactics against Arzhanov were to run straight out, right out. I feel I can run either from behind or in front and still get a good time. Since he wasn't there, I saw no need to change my tactics. That way you don't have to worry about anyone else. Just get rid of them from the start.

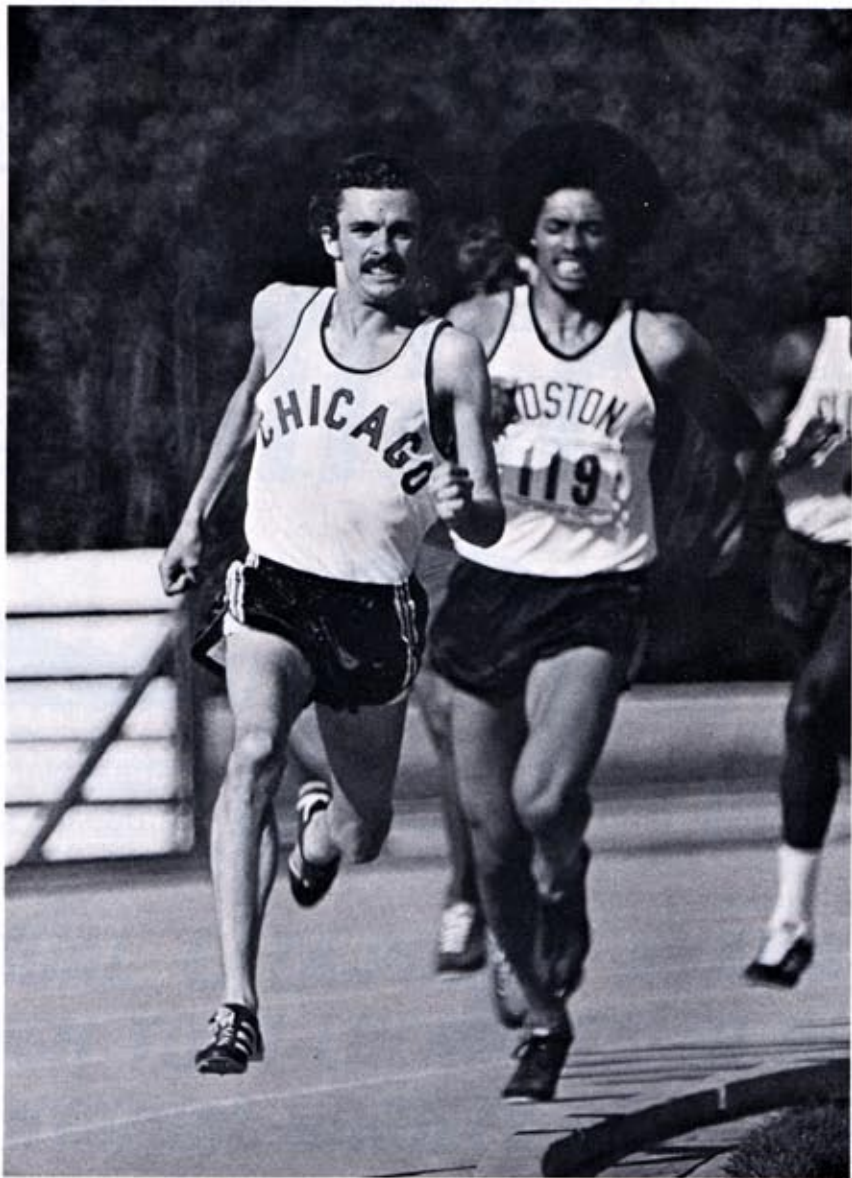
T&FN: *You then ran a 1:43.9 at Stockholm, making four races in one season where you almost got the 800 record, and there was the screw-up at Vons the year before. Weren't you starting to feel a Bible of the Sport*

little snakebit by this time?

Wohlhuter: Well, technically, I don't have it, but to satisfy myself I suppose I can say I have. As far as the best two-lap times goes, I've got it. I've got that satisfaction.

T&FN: *The next big race was the thousand-meter record. You said ahead of time that you thought you could beat the record. Had you ever run the distance before?*

Wohlhuter: I did once in a pre-Olympic meet before Munich, but that was it. I



Dave Drennan

thought I had a shot at the record. I merely calculated the times I needed for each segment of the race, and they weren't that difficult to get.

T&FN: *Next biggie is the Oslo mile against Walker, Dixon and Boit, which I guess is the heaviest field you ever faced at the longer distance.*

Wohlhuter: I thought I could get a good time and I thought the pace was going to be fast enough to allow for a good time. As it turned out, it wasn't what I had

hoped, but I certainly can't complain about 3:54.4, or my place-finish.

T&FN: *Did you still have confidence in your speed to beat the others when you were behind at the 1500 post?*

Wohlhuter: Well, I read in *T&FN* that I ran the last 120 in 13.9, which compares with what anyone has ever done. If that's true, then I guess I can compete well over at the 1500/mile and finish quite effectively.

T&FN: *Are you entertaining any thoughts now that you might be better at the 1500/mile?*

Wohlhuter: No, I don't think I'm necessarily better. I think I can run both of them well. But that's more or less all I really try to do.

T&FN: *That was basically your season, right there. Didn't see your name in any big cross country races. Were you in any at all?*

Wohlhuter: What I usually do is kinda keep it low-key, whereby I do a lot of roadwork. I come out and run a few of our local meets. I ran two of them this year, and that was the extent of my cross country. Both of them were four-mile races, and I just strode through them.

T&FN: *You went through the whole year without any injuries.*

Wohlhuter: I had no problems at all, which was quite fortunate. In this sport you almost have to be 100% healthy to be really effective.

T&FN: *So, it seems that throughout your career, you've continuously been moving up. The 100 and 220, then the 440, then the 880, now a few 1500s and miles.*

Do you have any wild thoughts for when you get old and slow about running in the 5000, or something insanely long like that?

Wohlhuter: I don't think so, purely because I have a foot problem that I have to be very careful of and I have to limit myself where I don't run too many miles, so I can sort of save it. I don't plan on running a lot of distance races. My running style doesn't lend itself to longer competitive races. I may have a hell of a finish after 26 miles, but you have to get there first. □