

## SAID AOUITA

Said Aouita is a man of many parts and many worlds. As a middle distance runner, he has exhibited a fantastic range—a range which is likely to grow even wider in coming years.

Born in Morocco, he points out, "I am a pure Moroccan and a pure Arab." He still spends much of each winter in his native land, but otherwise resides abroad. He has lived in France and currently lives in the famous Tuscan city of Siena in Italy. He represents Athletica Boianese, a club based in the small town of Boiano.

He went to study in France for a university degree in physical education, and began running seriously in 1979. By the end of that season, he could already claim marks among the leading times by the world's Juniors.

Two years later, he won the World University Games 1500. He reached the top in 1984 with a smashing victory in the Olympic 5000 and cemented his place among the world's elite last year with World Records in the 1500 (3:29.46) and 5000 (13:00.40). The last runner to own WRs at both distances at the same time was Hungarian Sandor Iharos in 1955.

Apart from Arabic, French is Aouita's best language. He also speaks some Italian, English and Spanish. But he chose to speak French in answering our questions during a conversation in mid-March in Siena.

Generally speaking ("En general," as he often says), Aouita avoided most of the strong judgments sometimes credited to him by other interviewers. Yet he left no doubts about subjects and people he did not wish to discuss. Extremely well-educated by current African standards, Aouita speaks in a soft, clear but somewhat formal manner:

**T&FN:** After you won the Olympic 5000 in Los Angeles, you said that if Henry Rono could break four World Records in one year, then why not you in 1985. You never have been one to hold back your opinions about how fast you can run, but what is the basis of such outspoken confidence?

**Aouita:** Every athlete has his own character, mentality and intelligence. It is true that I didn't end up breaking four or five World Records in the single season of 1985.

I preferred, instead, to plan my career more rationally. I concentrated on the Olympics in 1984 and then on running record times last year. I see the '86 season as a year of transition and rest, while at the same time beginning preparations for the World Championships in 1987 and the Olympics in 1988.

**T&FN:** What are your predictions of what you can ultimately run—from the 800 through the 10,000, and even in the steeplechase?



Theo van de Raaij

**Aouita:** Well, in the 800, I really haven't tried hard at it so far. I know I can improve considerably on my personal best [1:44.38], and I feel the World Record is within my capabilities.

The 1500 meters is my favorite event, the distance I like the best. I feel perfectly at ease running it. The same goes for the mile.

Distances like the 2000 meters—a non-Olympic distance—hold little interest for me.

The 5000—that is the distance of the future for me. Yes, even though I already hold the World Record for it! And I may try the 10,000, probably next year. Finally, the steeplechase also is in my focus for the future.

**T&FN:** Which of your record efforts during 1985 gave you the most satisfaction?

**Aouita:** Actually, not any one in particular. In every run, I aimed to achieve my maximum, but for one reason or another, I always fell short of my ultimate.

The 5000 record in Oslo wasn't a perfect race, by any means. Neither was the 1500 record in Berlin—I felt a pain in my leg in the closing stages. In fact, I suffered a lot in general over the last 500m of the Berlin race.

In my best races over 2000 and 3000 meters, I was bothered by my hamstring injury. So, voila, I never was able to run the "perfect" race.

**T&FN:** How is the leg feeling now?

**Aouita:** Compared to the end of last season and during last fall, it is a little better. Every now and then, I still experience pain, but I hope things eventually will go well this year.

**T&FN:** Like American athletes, you won't have one big meet to aim for in 1986. So what will be your aim, to set more World Records?

**Aouita:** As I said, I see '86 as a transition year before the championship years of '87 and '88. Yet I also will seize every opportunity I can to improve my personal bests and also to try other distances. But most of all, I still want to maintain my place at the very top level of running.

**T&FN:** Which runners in the world do you feel are most capable of preventing you from reaching your goals for each distance?

**Aouita:** I am not interested in the doings of other athletes, nor do I want to become involved in the details of their preparations. I prefer to just concentrate on my own activities.

**T&FN:** Well then, would you comment on some of your chief opponents, men such as Cram, Coe, Maree, Cova, Padilla?

**Aouita:** En general, Cram-c'est un bon athlete. [He repeated the same two words—"bon athlete"—for each of the

runners named.] There are good athletes whom I respect to the fullest. There are others who might not be quite so good, but whom I also respect.

But there also are some athletes *qui ne sont pas bien*: they are not normal. They use "other things" to improve their performances. I don't like to talk about them at all.

**T&FN:** After your 3rd in the Helsinki 1500 in 1983, what caused you to believe so strongly that you could win the 5000 in Los Angeles?

**Aouita:** In '83, I was trying to adapt to world-class levels. At Helsinki, I made the mistake of trying to run a tactical race.

## MINI-INTERVIEW WITH STEVE CRAM

*After the titanic 1500 duel in Nice last July it's hard to speak of Said Aouita without thinking about Steve Cram. How does the British mile star analyze his Moroccan rival? France's L'Equipe Magazine was curious, and Jerome Sicard put the questions to Cram:*

**L'E:** Everyone awaits your next confrontation.

**Cram:** This year it will be difficult. I am fixed on two big meets, the Commonwealth Games and the European Championships, if I still feel capable then. To tell you the truth, I doubt I will.

**L'E:** And at Rome '87, the World Championships?

**Cram:** Second problem. Aouita has announced his intentions of running the 5000 and 10,000. Unfortunately... or, fortunately! The 1500 is programmed for the same day as the 5000.

**L'E:** That's sort of an evasion.

**Cram:** I don't see why. Like I told you, I have already beaten him in three of four meetings. And I think I will be equally strong for the next battle. His method of running suits me equally well.

**L'E:** When are you going to start hunting in the 5000?

**Cram:** I don't think this is the time. I'm perhaps a bit too slow. The 5000 is completely different. It takes a special athlete to shine simultaneously at both distances. Aouita is a good example, not me. I don't see myself training for two distances at once. Perhaps I can be good at the 5000, but I don't want to be good; I want to be the best.

**L'E:** How are your off-the-track relations with Aouita?

**Cram:** We understand each other very well. There is, alas, the language barrier, but he has begun to speak a little English. We have a mutual respect.

**L'E:** Is that all?

**Cram:** No, no. We are truly buddies. We take a few jugs together after the meets. You understand that I don't

I lost because of a lack of experience.

I was injured early in 1984 and I did not have the speed and power to run all the rounds scheduled for the 1500 in the Olympics. So I chose the 5000 at the last moment.

**T&FN:** After winning the Olympic 5000, you said you felt you could have won the 1500 had you run it. Your outspokenness is a distinctive feature of yours. Is that a trait of just Said Aouita, or of Moroccans in general?

**Aouita:** It depends. Every Moroccan has his own head and his own ideas. True, I have lot of confidence in my abilities.

My countrymen vary according to

see him during the meets, but we always get together for a little dialogue. Our training, our plans. With me, he never hesitates to take me into his confidence. It's good to find such a rare one among my adversaries.

**L'E:** Sometimes Aouita is called the Cassius Clay of middle distance. Do his declarations bother you?

**Cram:** I remain a skeptic. I believe that people are too quick to confuse the words of Aouita with commentary by his coach.

I remember the press conference at London in September of 1984, where Aouita was responding in French. His "manager" was translating. Two friends of mine, French-speaking English journalists, assured me that "the manager was forcing things a little."

He said that Said was planning on breaking all the World Records from the 1500 to the 5000. I had the impression that Said's words were a little more subtle.

**L'E:** What about the 3:27 he's thinking of for 1500m?

**Cram:** That I find a little ambitious; 3:28 would be more reasonable. The same for 3:43 in the mile. At Oslo, with Sebastian Coe, I ran 3:46, in a race that was essentially tactical. I think I can envision picking up another two seconds.

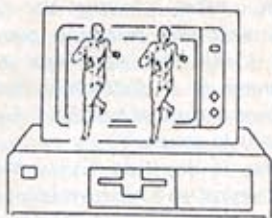
But getting back to the 1500, 3:29 is a very good time. It will be astonishing if anybody goes much under that in the next four or five years.

**L'E:** Do you have an "anti-Aouita" plan?

**Cram:** No, his World Records don't interest me. That type of challenge, ruled by the watch, doesn't concern me. I want to do my best at the World Championships in 1987 and in the Seoul Games a year later. I prefer to concentrate my attention on those dates. Records come and go. Titles remain.

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### SAID AOUITA INTERVIEW—continued

their origin. But especially among the younger set, I know many people who are prepared to conquer any obstacle to reach their goals.

**T&FN:** *How is the Aouita who races on the track similar to the Aouita off the track? How is he different?*

**Aouita:** No one should confuse Aouita the runner with the Aouita off the track. They are fundamentally different; I guess that's just part of the sport as I see it.

**T&FN:** *How does running and racing reflect Aouita, the man?*

**Aouita:** I feel that as I have gathered more and more experience as an athlete, my mentality has been influenced accordingly. Yes, very positively.

**T&FN:** *What have the reactions to your successes been like from the people of Morocco, especially after your Olympic win in '84 and the World Records last year?*

**Aouita:** The people have been very kind to me, particularly His Majesty King Hassan II. He has helped me and Nawal El Moutawakel [women's 400 hurdles champion at Los Angeles] a great deal, assuring us a comfortable life and providing the best conditions possible for our training and preparations for competitions. He protects us and loves us as if we were his own children. He never ceases to encourage us.

**T&FN:** *You have spoken in the past of how much you do "for your country." Why, then, don't you live and train in Morocco?*

**Aouita:** In fact, I live and train in Morocco during the winter. But I come to Italy—my friend and adviser Enrico Dionisi lives here in Siena—to tune up for competition. Here I am in close contact with the rest of Europe—and that is where most of the best action takes place.

**T&FN:** *How did you begin running in the first place? What was its attraction?*

**Aouita:** I played soccer as a teenager, but in school I also would run now and then. Eventually, I proved to be so successful in running that I took it to my heart and decided to concentrate fully on it.

**T&FN:** *As a youngster, were you ever inspired by any particular athletes?*

**Aouita:** As a youth, I liked Lasse Viren very much. I also admired Miruts Yifter and Steve Ovett.

**T&FN:** *Is it true that basically you coach yourself?*

**Aouita:** Yes, I've never had a coach. But I also never let myself be influenced or guided by the methods of other athletes. *Jamais.* [Never.]

Sometimes other runners ask me about my training, about what methods or philosophies I follow. It's as though they would like to act likewise.

But everyone should decide by himself what is best for him. My own methods—even if they are hard and

demanding—suit me fine. Every athlete has his own intelligence and should use it accordingly.

**T&FN:** *Would you eventually like to coach?*

**Aouita:** Maybe I will become a coach one day, but right now it's impossible to say. But regardless of that, track & field always will be very important to me.

**T&FN:** *Any thoughts about how long you will compete?*

**Aouita:** It all depends on what I am able to do this year. I'm going to explore other distances as I want to learn more about the range of my possibilities.

First, I will concentrate on the 800 and 1500—if the results are fully rewarding, I may run both at the World Championships next year and the Olympics in 1988.

If I do decide to double, I probably would have a longer career. But if I opt for longer distances, my career would by then be closer to its conclusion.

**T&FN:** *Many times the comments we see from you—often in the French press—seem very flowery, yet intense. Is this a function of the translation process, or part of you as a person?*

**Aouita:** In fact, I never received a gift from the French. They invariably saw me with a critical eye. I've never read an article in a French paper that was favorable to me.

**T&FN:** *Even when you were competing for a club in France, in Marignane?*

**Aouita:** No, mainly after that. I respect journalists, but obviously I don't run for them. I have known journalists who write the truth, who have a conscience and who are real men. The majority, however, tend to tell lies.

**T&FN:** *Some of your quotes make you sound very antagonistic toward your opponents. Do you have relationships, on or off the track, with any of them?*

**Aouita** [Finally smiling for the first time.]: I respect my rivals, but I don't like to talk about them. Least of all about those who aren't "normal" athletes. □

Said Aouita (Sigh-eeed Ow-ee-tah) was born November 2, 1960, in Kenitra, Morocco, and is 5-9 $\frac{1}{2}$ /132. The 1984 Olympic 5000 champ, he was 3rd in the '83 World Championship 1500. Set World Records at 1500 meters and 5000 in 1985.

His PRs (with all-time places in parentheses): 200—22.8; 400—46.9; 800—1:44.38 '83; 1000—2:15.71 '83; 1500—3:29.46 '85 (1); Mile—3:46.92 '85 (2); 2000—4:54.02 '85 (4); 3000—7:32.94 '85 (3); 5000—13:00.40 '85 (1). See p. 58 to find out how his PRs rate.

His progression (with World Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	800	1500	Mile	5000
1978	17				14:10.0
1979	18		3:42.3		13:48.5
1980	19	1:47.8	3:37.08		
1981	20	1:47.0	3:37.69		13:39.0
1982	21	1:47.4	3:37.37	3:57.75	14:05.7
1983	22	1:44.38	3:32.54 (4)	3:52.97	
1984	23	1:46.81	3:31.54 (1)	3:49.54	13:04.78 (1)
1985	24	1:45.81	3:29.46 (2)	3:46.92	13:00.40 (1)

Track & Field News