

SEBASTIAN COE

T&FN INTERVIEW by DON STEFFENS

Amazing what being the World Record holder in the mile can do for your fame. From being familiar only to track experts to being the most talked-about name in the entire world of sports. Sebastian Coe made that journey in just 3 minutes and 49 seconds.

For those who are still wondering, "What's a Sebastian Coe?" here's some background:

Sebastian Newbold Coe was born in London on September 29th, 1956. At a slight, but muscular 5-9 $\frac{1}{4}$ /129, he carries almost exactly the same dimensions as Rick Wohlhuter (5-9/130).

He just earned a degree in economics from Loughborough University. Coached by his father, Peter.

Going against the modern trend, he has moved *down* in distance during his career, having started out as a cross country and long distance star (1973 English Schools under-17 3000 champion).

In 1975 he scored a bronze medal in the European Junior Championships 1500 (3:45.2). The speed began to show in 1976, when he covered 2 laps in 1:47.7.

Early 1977 first presented his case as a runner of international caliber, as he won the European Indoor with a 1:46.5, just 0.1 off the World Indoor Record.

Injury bothered him much of the year, but he lowered his PR to 1:45.0 in September, auguring his readiness for the real big-time. A knee problem slowed his early 1978 season, but not so much that he wasn't able to give the world a taste of exciting front-running.

That was at the European Championships, as he went out in a daring 49.3, 1:16.2 before succumbing to Olaf Beyer and Steve Ovett in the stretch. He had preceded that 1:44.8 finish with a PR 1:44.3 race in Belgium, and in mid-September finished his season with 1:44.0.

Coincident with his two World Records this summer has been yet another downwards move, this to the 400, where he was actually the first Briton across the line *Bible of the Sport*

in the British Championships, in a PR 46.87 (old best 47.6).

That's not Juantorena-country, but it's a turn of raw speed that few other serious Olympic 800 contenders can match.

Speaking of comparisons with Juantorena, Coe notes, "I've got a long

5000." A few things have changed since then; what will the next year bring?

Whoever would have thought that the exploits of Sebastian Coe would free Steve Ovett of his "most despised man in Britain" role? Not that they now like him—he has just gone from jerk to non-person.

(The following conversation was taped with Coe in Great Britain the weekend after his 800 record—prior to his mile shocker. Therefore, all references to "World Record" etc., are to his Bislett 800.)

T&FN: *Did the World Record come as a surprise to you?*

Coe: The speed of it did, certainly. I felt that my preparations prior to that hadn't been bad. My intention, however, was to get a fast time. It was a combination of things you rarely get at one time. It was a rather strange feeling in that I felt that something good was going to happen. I sensed that I was feeling good, and that the track was fast. The crowd had been very, very enthusiastic all evening. The scenario was just set. But, 1:42.4 was a bit unexpected.

T&FN: *It's interesting that this World Record came when you weren't really prepared for it.*

Coe: By my own standards, and those of my coach, I wasn't more than 85% race fit. Certainly not as well-prepared as I hope to be for the major competitions at the end of the season.

T&FN: *What are your plans for the rest of the year?*

Coe: To say I'm going to take the year off and devote it totally to athletics, is really untrue. I'm going back to Loughborough University, hopefully to start another degree. So that in itself will give me plenty of scope for alternatives away from the track. I will be able to devote more time to athletics and give as much time to it as I need. I won't be wasting a lot of time with the chance of breeding boredom.

I think the key to next year will be consistency. I don't see the chance of



stride for somebody of 5-9; it has been measured at 7-feet-plus, so although that's not the stride of Juantorena, it's the stride in relation to the height that's important.

"My main problem has never been getting the stride length, it's been making sure that with the stride I'm not plodding too much."

The big question(s) now is that of exactly where Coe will appear in the Games. Will he double, or just go for one? If one, which one?

It's interesting to note that less than a year ago, young Sebastian said, "At Moscow, I will be a runner in the 1500 and

getting the consistent sort of training here in England I need if we have another winter like we had this past winter. So, I hope to get to go to the Finnish training center in Southern Spain. It's a very good place, the weather is good and, more importantly, they've got complete medical backup.

T&FN: *What is the life like now, that of runner and student?*

Coe: My routine won't alter. I've got a lot of hard work to put in before Moscow. Recently, I haven't spent much time in training because of exams and preparing for Malmo. I wasn't getting meticulously fit for that, obviously. But now I'm going to be spending a little more time in training.

T&FN: *How do you see Moscow?*

Coe: The World Record hasn't affected my plans at all. My actual plans haven't been completely decided yet, anyway. I'm not totally decided whether I'll run 800, 1500 or both. I think I'll just keep going along the same lines as I have and see what happens.

The mile is a very difficult event for me. I've only run about three, in that many years. As far as I'm concerned, I've got a lot of learning to do. I've actually got to learn how to run 4 laps. I think I've got a lot of experience to gain before I can start talking about super performances at that distance. I feel no pressure in it at all.

T&FN: *Does running against Steve Ovett concern you?*

Coe: In terms of meeting over a mile and as something to look forward to, I think it's a bit premature. If I concentrate on the mile over the next year and a half, I think the meetings from that time on will be much more interesting. I've only raced against the guy once, at the European Championships final. In terms of athletics, he is a magnificent athlete. But when we get to a racing situation, he is just another competitor.

T&FN: *How do you approach the race, tactically?*

Coe: I try to cover the ground in the first lap. My main improvement over last year is that now I'm able to hang on to a blisteringly fast lap and still survive. This has just come from being a year older, a year stronger, a year fitter. I think speed is the key for everything; there is now no event where you can hide away from speed.

T&FN: *How do you try to run the 800?*

Coe: With a fast last lap and with relaxation, is the key. If you become tight or worried about a race, you're going to get screwed up. I don't think there's very much "cruising" at any time now in top class racing. The closest to it might be between 300-400m in the first lap. At the bell, presuming you're feeling good, you try to start dissipating some of the final effort so that it starts coming slowly. Then, by the time you get to 200m you're beginning to really drive for home. In the final straight, you're beginning to feel the stress. If things are going well, it's sort of a funny thing.

T&FN: *How will you approach your own concept of proper number of competitions now?*

Coe: Obviously, I am going to be in a certain amount of demand. I think I'm going to have to be tough and stick to my

You can't remember much about it, even while you're running.

At Oslo, I certainly didn't feel very much strain. I felt like I was flowing much more than I've ever done. It's easy to become overawed or change your tactics because the crowd is bringing you along a bit quickly. This happened, to some extent last year in Prague, in my first major competition. I took the first lap faster than I should have.

T&FN: *Your father is your coach. How does that work out?*

Coe: It's a simple relationship. In terms of athletics, I think of him as a coach, not as a father. He can be as rude and as critical as he needs to be.

I think that the key to coaching athletics is not that you know so much about athletics, but that you know a lot about the person you coach. I think most coaches would tell you that they would consider it far more important to know how an athlete ticks, thinks, works, what motivates him, rather than a 100% knowledge of athletics without that emotional feel. If that kind of situation works, which this one obviously does, it's probably one of the best situations you can get. You are close to the person who coaches you, he knows you probably better than any other person, which is vitally important.

Fortunately, my father's knowledge of athletics is also first-rate. That's why I'm doubly lucky.

T&FN: *How long have you worked together? What's kept you together?*

Coe: We've always had some kind of benchmark to reach each year. Apart from a year which I missed due to an injury, we've never failed to reach that goal. His coaching has been totally with me, from the day I started. Don't get the idea that I was channeled into athletics, so that my parents could live through the success I bring them. I'm there because I want to. If I turn around tomorrow and say I've had enough, that will be it.

I would say he enjoys track, but it's not his sport anyway. If there would be a choice between the AAA Championships and the cycling championships in Leicester, he would probably go to Leicester, if I wasn't running.

T&FN: *How is your other relationship, that of a son, with your father?*

Coe: When it comes to things like preparing for exams, that's when the parental role sort of takes over. There's never been a time, in the house, when I've been allowed to forget that there are exams to be got after. It's the same with the other kids in the family.

T&FN: *How will you approach your own concept of proper number of competitions now?*

Coe: Obviously, I am going to be in a certain amount of demand. I think I'm going to have to be tough and stick to my

plans. Probably only another four or five meetings. The WR has come early enough in my season that I have enough outings to fill my waking hours with other thoughts rather than just sort of bask in this time. Everyone who runs a World Record must recognize that people are going to be interested in him. That will not unduly worry me, because only I, and a few close associates, know what is expected of me.

T&FN: *What interests you other than track?*

Coe: Films, theater, just enjoying myself generally. Live music. I like jazz; I've got a good collection of jazz records.

T&FN: *Will you celebrate now, let yourself go a little bit?*

Coe: No, not really. Since it's the middle of the season, I'm still very serious. I've been spending as much free time as I've had in training trying to catch up.

T&FN: *Do you think your getting the WR will give hope to the 90-pound-weaklings?*

Coe: I hope so. When Juantorena won the Olympics, as far as the athletics specialists were concerned, the people my size were better off just hanging up the shoes. I think it's very wrong to classify athletes. We're all different with different talents.

T&FN: *You've been referred to in the British Press as one of the all-time greats, statistically. What do you think?*

Coe: It's remarkable how quickly the transition takes place for people to start labeling you. Obviously, I don't consider myself to be performing much differently before as afterwards. And the Oslo race certainly won't make any difference how I prepare for future competitions. □

The All-Time Mile List

The raft of PRs in the Oslo mile went a long way towards rewriting the all-time world mile list. The top 25 performers of all-time (with the top 19 performances) as of July 25:

1.	3:49.0	Sebastian Coe (GB)	7/17/79
2.	3:49.4	John Walker (NZ)	8/12/75
3.	3:51.0	Filbert Bayi (Tan)	5/17/75
4.	3:51.1	Jim Ryun (US)	6/23/67
5.	3:51.2	Steve Scott (US)	7/17/79
	3:51.3	Ryun	7/17/66
6.	3:52.0	Ben Jipcho (Ken)	7/ 2/73
	3:52.0	Walker	7/11/77
7.	3:52.1	Craig Masback (US)	7/17/79
8.	3:52.2	Marty Liquori (US)	5/17/75
	3:52.2	Walker	6/30/75
9.-	3:52.5	Th. Wessinghage (WG)	7/ 3/78
9.-	3:52.5	Eamonn Coghlan (Eire)	7/17/79
	3:52.6	Bayi	7/ 2/73
11.	3:52.6	Jozef Plachy (Cze)	7/ 3/78
	3:52.6i	Coghlan	2/16/79
	3:52.8	Ryun	7/29/72
12.-	3:52.8	Steve Ovett (GB)	9/20/78
12.-	3:52.8	John Robson (GB)	7/17/79
14.	3:53.1	Kip Keino (Ken)	9/10/67
15.-	3:53.2	Tony Waldrop (US)	4/27/74
15.-	3:53.2	Wilson Waigwa (Ken)	6/27/78
15.-	3:53.2	Grah. Williamson (GB)	7/17/79
18.-	3:53.3	Dave Wottle (US)	6/20/73
18.-	3:53.3	Rick Wohlhuter (US)	5/31/75
20.-	3:53.6	Michel Jazy (Fr)	6/ 9/65
20.-	3:53.6	Rod Dixon (NZ)	6/30/75
22.	3:53.7	Sydney Maree (S Afr)	5/ 7/79
23.-	3:53.8	Jürgen May (EG)	12/11/65
23.-	3:53.8	Bodo Tummier (WG)	8/22/68
25.	3:54.1	Peter Snell (NZ)	11/17/64