

## SEBASTIAN COE

by John Burles

**W**hen you have the sort of season Sebastian Coe enjoyed in 1979—setting World Records in 3 events—it would be understandably easy to have difficulty ever producing a comparable campaign.

The problem is magnified when one has done his record-setting in that most public of all running domains, the mile. Compound the whole situation by the presence of a countryman who takes away a pair of your records and the pressure becomes intense. Climaxing the whole situation is the fact that this great rival is Steve Ovett and that both live in Great Britain, noted for its voracious press. The mental pressures have not been slight.

The 24-year-old Coe is bearing up just fine, however, as 1980 brought another WR and two Olympic medals and 1981 has dawned as another world-beater.

We sat down for a chat with Sebastian in late June, shortly before his pair of July World Records, with Olympic decathlon champ Daley Thompson an interested bystander.

A grad student in economics, Coe displayed his keen mind as we covered the ins and outs not only of Seb Coe, but also of our sport and its current state of flux:

**T&FN:** Sport is all about enjoying yourself. Is there still the same enjoyment in athletics that you started out with?

**Coe:** It hasn't changed at all. Obviously, the pressures are different. The expectations in a way are different but I don't think the day-to-day enjoyment has changed. The pressures are more—there's no doubt about that.

**T&FN:** Do you still look on it in the same way as you did in the early days?

**Coe:** I, I think so. Obviously, some of the sparkle of the early days has gone. It has increased in other areas. There are some areas where I enjoy my athletics more, some where it's a bit less.

**T&FN:** Where do you enjoy it more?

**Coe:** In a funny sort of way I enjoy the freedom. I think most athletes would admit that you get to a certain level and you do lead a fairly privileged existence. You can fly around the world and see countries. You can even choose countries that you have not raced in before, just because you haven't been there, and that kind of thing.

**T&FN:** Do you see athletics as a career? That is, sport as a career?

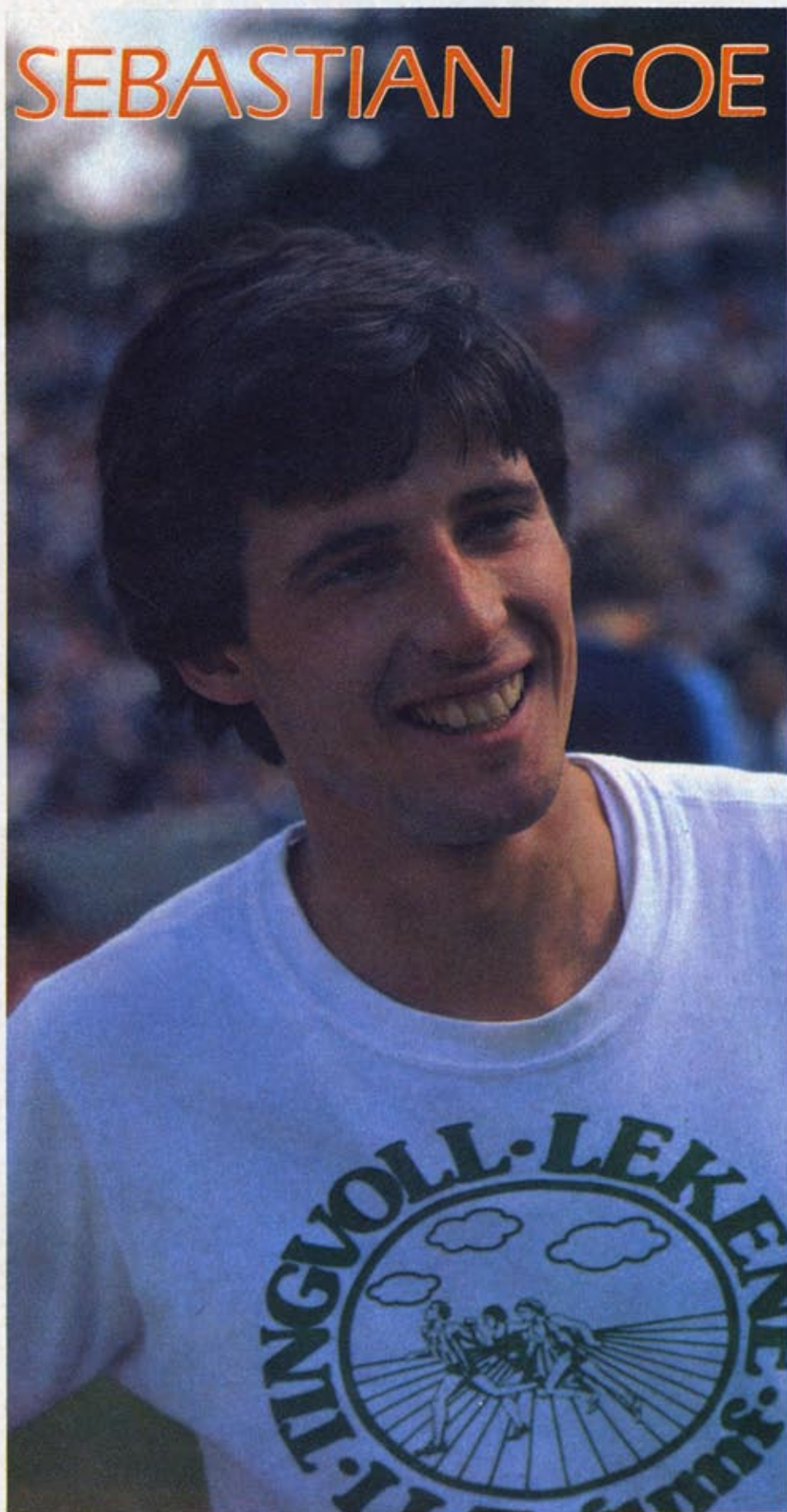
**Coe:** No.

**T&FN:** When you finish running will you turn to something else?

**Coe:** I should think so. I don't think I will stay in the sport.

**T&FN:** Athletics is going through a transitory period at the moment. Rather a rocky period because it may go Open. How would you like to see it emerge?

**Coe:** Hopefully stronger and better equipped than it is at the moment to face



Mark Shearman



the problems that we have got at the moment. We have a system that is crumbling. It's got to emerge stronger. It's got to develop into a system where anyone who wishes to compete can do so.

At the same time you have a group of athletes who, if they are capable of making money out of the sport, should be allowed to do all the other sorts of things that professional sportspersons can do.

It's not a matter of being greedy. It's a matter of trying to secure your future. Most of us have put a long time into it: some of us have been going since the age of 11 or 12.

**T&FN:** *And, as you say, without being grasping about it, if there are rewards to come you would like to take them.*

**Coe:** Yes, and it's not just a reward for the race. It's a reward for the 7 and 8 hours a day that someone like this guy [pointing to Thompson] puts in.

The distance work on the road, the unsociable hours. I don't want to plead that it's the life of a monk, but I can't think of a sport—with the possible exception of swimming—where people train as hard, and put that kind of hours in.

**T&FN:** *The name Seb Coe has become almost something of an industry. People all over this country, and possibly throughout the world, make money by some sort of association with yourself, or maybe use the name. In various ways they make money out of it, but technically you can't make anything. Do you think this is wrong?*

**Coe:** Yes, I have to say that. What is the future of the individual athlete? If we are talking about athletics becoming a livelihood, and there is no reason it shouldn't; if we talk about going to a meeting, say in Brussels, or going to a meeting anywhere and contributing to bringing in a 50-60,000 gate, then why shouldn't the athletes get a share of what's going on? I don't think there is any argument in economics anywhere in the world that says they shouldn't.

**T&FN:** *What help—financial and moral—do you think you could have done with and perhaps didn't get on the way up?*

**Coe:** I don't think I wanted for very much, to be honest. There are situations where cash grants if they are used in the right way can be very, very useful, but I have to say that I don't think a cash grant has ever contributed, or been a major contribution, to someone's success on the track or in the field.

**T&FN:** *If it's there?*

**Coe:** If it's there it's there, and it will come out. Coaching is far more important to throw money at.

**T&FN:** *Think we should finance them?*

**Coe:** Pay coaches. It's not as flippant as it sounds. In the formative years of an athlete it's the coach that gives up possible career and career advancement.

*The Bible of the Sport*

**T&FN:** *Do you think the sport is underprofessionalized?*

**Coe:** I do for the way the sport is at the moment. If you forget the word "professional" with anything that just smacks of money.

Anyone in the sport operating at the level at which we are all operating here is professional in terms of attitude. We have to be. We have to maximize and make as much as we possibly can from what are

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## "It's Going To Be A Big World And If The Athletes Aren't Careful They Are Going To Get Swallowed Up."

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very limited resources in this country. It calls for a professional attitude.

**T&FN:** *Presumably, if the sport goes Open that would be a most likely area for you to become associated with.*

**Coe:** It's not even that. If the sport becomes Open then you will need professional people to deal with professional people. The only thing that will alter for the athletes is that they will suddenly be dealing directly with people who have been in that world for a long time. They know the business.

You will have people entering the sport who are professional advertising men, professional administrators, professional managers. It's going to be a big world and if the athletes aren't careful they are going to be swallowed up.

**T&FN:** *Do you think it's far off, turning to Open sport?*

**Coe:** I would think within the next two years. As long as it's a thought-about changeover and it's not just something that happens overnight.

**T&FN:** *The people who appear to have the most resistance to it are the administrators.*

**Coe:** I don't know about that. The AAA has put forward a lot of plans. There are a few key figures who prefer it to stay as it was 30 to 40 years ago. Thank goodness they seem to have less say than they used to have.

**T&FN:** *There have been a number of people who voiced the opinion that you could be a better runner at 5000m than you are lower down the scale. What's your reaction?*

**Coe:** Don't know.

**T&FN:** *Must always seem a possibility to you to move up.*

**Coe:** I think the motivation for any athlete should be to improve themselves as athletes, irrespective of what they win or

what they lose. Athletically, you can never reach perfection.

Even the best athletes have weaknesses. They have to. You are just looking to maximize strengths, minimize weaknesses. For me, it's just wanting to run faster, wanting to run better.

**T&FN:** *Do you enjoy being a personality?*

**Coe:** Sometimes it can be! It's nice to be recognized in a sport that you have worked hard at and nice to be recognized for something you have done. Most people in that area would admit there are times such as when you are sitting in a quiet corner of a restaurant to get a few hours to yourself—or when you are with friends—and it can be a constant stream of autographs and pats on the back.

**T&FN:** *Does it change your attitude towards people?*

**Coe:** Temporarily it does. You can feel a bit annoyed. But I think what it does is it alters the place you can go to. It's a funny thing, even going out on the road. I never go out on the road when the schools are turning out; they run alongside you. . .

**T&FN:** *How much does it mean to you to be World Record holder?*

**Coe:** Athletically, a lot, because it's something you have worked for. If you are looking in terms of goals in athletics then there can be only two achievements, really. World Records and Olympic medals. It's very nice and a privilege to have both. . . even if you only hold onto one for a week.

**Thompson (prophetically):** Ahh! He'll get it back next week.

**T&FN:** *When you see one go, does it prompt you to think, "I'll get that back."?*

**Coe:** I think so, yes.

**T&FN:** *Do you feel tense before an event?*

**Coe:** I always feel nervous. I always have the right kind of nerves, but last year was different.

You're preparing for something like that; you're living between training sessions and you're living on your nerves all the time; you're worried that the next time you go out will be the time you do your tendon or [looking at Thompson] your arm's going to hurt after the shot put or whatever.

You get to the point when it's a month-and-a-half away and you're ticking the days off the calendar. You think, "I've got another 5 weeks," and it doesn't go very quickly either.

**T&FN:** *What about the night before the Olympics?*

**Coe:** I can sleep at the best of times. I can sleep 10-11 hours every night without a problem. I can sleep during the day. I could sleep now if I wanted to, but I couldn't get more than 2 hours sleep the night before the Games.

**T&FN:** *Do you think it took away from your performance?*



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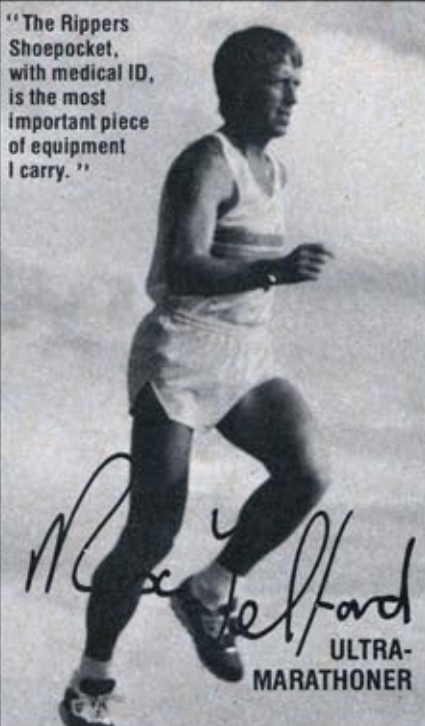
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SEBASTIAN COE—continued

Coe: I'm sure it did.

T&FN: Is that one reason we don't see World Record performances at the Olympics?

Coe: Well, the main aim is to win. It has to be, that's why they are not always the most spectacular athletics events.

T&FN: How do you manage to deal with that sort of tension?

Coe: I normally try and go to sleep but not always does that work. I thought it would be just like Brussels or some other meet, but it's a different situation. You can't even think of it in terms of anything you have ever done before.

T&FN: Are the tensions generated by the athletes?

Coe: No, not really. I think the athletes are the last people to generate that sort of tension.

I think it's the press. The media. Every time you come out of your room and go to breakfast there is a bloke asking, "Did you have a good night's sleep? What did you have for breakfast?"

Daley made the point. They make it like it's so important you can't help believing it's important. They are there when you have done badly; they are there when you have done well. But they haunt you when you have done badly.

T&FN: Did you feel the treatment you got over the 800m was a bit unfair?

Coe: I didn't. . . I can say now I didn't know at the time because I didn't read any of the papers. I didn't read any of the papers between the 800m and the 1500. I read them all when I got home; I thought they were very funny.

T&FN: You must have analyzed the 800 many times in your mind. Where do you think you went wrong?

Coe: Thirty-six hours before.

T&FN: Why was that?

Coe: Something in my preparation. Nerves, whatever it was, just got through. I stopped thinking about going through the race and just doing the things I could do. I started thinking of not doing things that would lead me to lose and I started thinking negatively about it.

I was in better shape at the Games than I ever have been. You can analyze it and you can look and say "I was wrong to be in that position at 200m," or "I should have gone then," and that kind of thing, but I don't think it serves any purpose, because what was happening out there to me wasn't thinking about the race.

T&FN: Were you not tuned into it?

Coe: I got so nervous that by the time I came to the race I think I had lost all the nerves for the race itself. When I finished the race I didn't feel disappointed. It was just a magic sense of relief to have just got out of the stadium. Then it was only about 30 minutes later that it started getting through.

T&FN: If the 800 was a disappointment and you say that when you

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came out of it it was a relief to get it over, what did you think after the 1500?

Coe: The same.

T&FN: Was it pleasure that you had won the race or pleasure that you had got it out of the way?

Coe: Pleasure that I was leaving Moscow, I think.

T&FN: Does that mean you didn't enjoy Moscow?

Coe: No. Not that I didn't enjoy Moscow, but I think the Olympics is too heavy a scene, if you like. The whole thing is too big. You're out somewhere two weeks stuck in a Village. It's not a natural thing. You don't ever do that in your normal lifestyle.

You race and then you have nowhere to go. You are back in the Village for 24 hours till you do the same thing again. You do that 6 times in 9 days: to me it's artificial.

T&FN: People say that athletics, especially at this level, is entertainment. Do you see it in these terms?

Coe: I don't think that athletes see themselves in those terms. When I race I race because it's a stepping stone to something else or it's the culmination of a lot of training. But I think, obviously, for the crowd athletics is now far more entertainment.

Sports crowds are getting more and more sophisticated all the time. People want style and entertainment and I think in athletics there is more and more clamor for World Records.

I think the clutch of World Records that British athletes have broken over the past few years has possibly done athletics a little bit of a disservice. The crowd expects it every time an athlete steps out onto the track. I think that unless they see a record broken of some description then a lot of the crowd go home feeling they have been cheated.

T&FN: I think there are a lot of people who turn up today and if you run, or if it's Steve Ovett, they are thinking that a record might come off today.

Coe: I saw two articles in newspapers—and they were by responsible athletics writers—saying that if I was running the 800 here then I would go for the World Record, and Steve was going for the mile, which is not even responsible journalism.

Nobody's going to remember; no crowd is going to remember that so-and-so of the Daily So-And-So wrote that there was going to be a World Record. It won't be them who is remembered for a comment. It is the athlete who had no intention in the first place, but who runs through a reasonable outing for what he wanted. Then the crowd is going to start looking around and saying, "Six seconds outside his personal best!" or, "Four seconds outside a World Record! What's going on!?"

T&FN: What is your reaction to the *The Bible of the Sport*



## MIDDLE DISTANCES

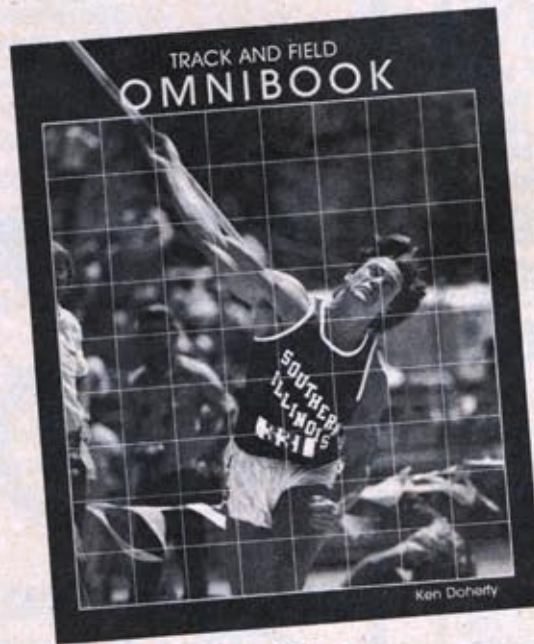
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SEBASTIAN COE—continued

newspaper journalist's comments?

Coe: He has got to write and sell newspapers. What sells newspapers better than breaking a bit of information or breaking some kind of expectation? But it's always unfair to a crowd, because overnight the tickets went from 4000 to about 12,000.

Now I'm not going to say that it was solely because someone says there is going to be some sort of record, but there will be a lot of people who bought tickets on the supposition that somebody was actually going for a record. They are going to be disappointed because you've only got to look out there: it's not the day for World Records and it's very early in the season.

T&FN: *You are cast by the press in the role of the Nice Guy, whilst Steve Ovett is cast as The Bad Guy. What is your reaction to that? Does it aggravate you?*

Coe: I think it aggravates us both to a certain extent. There's a lot of rivalry; there always will be.

T&FN: *It suits the press to have one nice guy and one the opposite. Do you think that this is what it's about?*

Coe: It suits them to write this sort of story, but I don't go along with the nice and the nasty bit. Those roles can swap as quickly as they want them to swap. One week you are a good boy, the next you're a bad boy. That's the world of the press. That's the world of the media.

T&FN: *Do you find them talking about you rather than about your athletics annoys you?*

Coe: I do, because they get into areas that don't concern athletics at all. Because the only people who consistently make money—or the only people who consistently take a salary out of athletics—are the people who write about it.

The people who perform a task in the media, they live off the sport, and it ill becomes anybody to start moralizing in newspapers about what might be happening inside the sport because they are only ones who consistently make cash out of the sport. □

Sebastian Newbold Coe was born September 29, 1956 and now measures 5-9/129. The 1979 Athlete Of The Year, he was '75 European Junior 1500 bronze medalist, Olympic 1500 champ in 1980, Olympic 800 runner-up in 1980. Has set 6 World Records outdoors, 2 in the 800 (1:42.33 in 1979, 1:41.72 in 1981), 2 in the 1000 (2:13.40 in 1980, 2:12.18 in 1981), 1 in the 1500 (3:32.03 in 1979) and 1 in the mile (3:48.95 in 1979). Indoors, he holds the 800 WR at 1:46.0. Other PRs: 46.79 ('79), 7:57.4 ('80), 14:06.2 ('80). His progression, with World Rankings in parentheses:

Year	Age	800	1000	1500	Mile
1970	13			4:31.8	
1971	14			4:18.0	
1972	15	1:59.9		4:05.9	
1973	16	1:56.0		3:55.0	
1974	17	did not compete (stress fractures)			
1975	18	1:53.8		3:45.2	
1976	19	1:47.7		3:42.67	3:58.35
1977	20	1:44.95			3:57.67
1978	21	1:43.97 (3)			4:02.0
1979	22	1:42.33 (1)		3:32.03 (1)	3:48.95
1980	23	1:44.7 (2)	2:13.40	3:32.19 (2)	
1981	24	1:41.72	2:12.18	3:31.95	