

Duane Solomon

by Sieg Lindstrom

Extraordinary potential sometimes takes its sweet time to ripen. Case in point: Duane Solomon.

While the 2-time USATF 800 champion broke 1:50 and took the California State title back in '02, and had a solid college career at USC, it wasn't until he connected with coach Johnny Gray that he really got rolling. All the way to a 4th-place finish at the London Olympics at age 27.

Gray—an assistant at Central Florida the last two seasons after four years at UCLA—is, of course, the 2-lap great and '92 Olympic bronze medalist who set the still-standing American Record, 1:42.60, back in '85.

An habitual frontrunner, Gray joined forces with Solomon, who also favors racing in the lead, four years ago, and Solomon has never been the same. He's simply been better. So much better that his thoughts this summer are all about taking down his coach's AR.

At 29, Solomon also envisions chasing World and Olympic titles perhaps through Tokyo in '20 when he'll be 35.

Why not? Gray broke 1:44 and placed 7th in the Atlanta Olympics at age 36.

T&FN caught up with Solomon in Orlando—where he followed Gray from SoCal last year—the day before he left on a mid-July foray to Europe.

Solomon: I leave for Monaco tomorrow. I'll be racing in Monaco and then I'll come back and have a month of training to get ready for the second half.

Then after the Commonwealth is done I'll go back out there and run the rest of the Diamond Leagues and then get ready for next year.

T&FN: It's an unusual season schedule-wise with that big competition break right in the middle of the summer if you're not from a Commonwealth or European country. Is that hard to work around?

Solomon: It's actually nice for me because the way my season went, I started out very good [with his 1:43.88 at Mt. SAC, the fastest ever in April] and then just kind of maintained; I was running pretty mediocre.

But now that we have the break I can get back to my training scheme again and get my strength up and be ready to go at it again. That actually works better for me.

T&FN: You were better than mediocre in Sacramento.

Solomon: Yeah. The cool thing about that

was that I came back from Europe a little earlier. I was going to stay out there a little longer but I wanted to come back, get acclimated to the time and get a little training in—because for the first few weeks I was racing back to back every weekend. I just really wanted to get my body rested and get some training in.

I got a good 2 weeks of training in and then went out to Sacramento and felt really good. I knew from that my body was coming back up. We're getting there again.

T&FN: You ran really fast early this year. What are you looking to do this season?

Solomon: I believe that because I ran so great early on, opening up at 1:43, I think that now we get a second wind again. We get to kind of redo what we did from the beginning. So I'm looking to reduplicate that but actually run a little quicker with some competition now, not having to do it solo.

Hopefully I can get in a perfect race with perfect conditions and come out with the American Record. So the goal this season is definitely to get the American Record.

T&FN: Did running 1:43.88 at Mt. SAC catch you by surprise?

Solomon: For the time of year that it was it was a little bit surprising but from the workouts we were doing I knew that I was ready to do something big.

Before we got to Mt. SAC I talked to Johnny and told him, "You

know, Johnny, I want to run 1:43 here."

The whole goal, really, was to break the stadium record that KD [Khadevis Robinson] had. It was, I think, 1:44-high. I told Johnny, "I don't just want to break it, I want to smash the record. I want to run 1:43."

Johnny told me, OK then hit these splits, do this and do this; but in his mind he didn't really think I was going to do it. I just went out there and ran aggressive, just ran the whole way.

T&FN: Did that result provoke any worry that maybe you were too fit too soon?

Solomon In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Duane Renard Solomon was born December 28, 1984, in Lompoc, California; 6-3/170 (1.90/77)

•**Schools:** Cabrillo (Lompoc) HS '03; USC '08; now represents Saucony

•**Coaches:** Peter Anderson (Cabrillo); Ron Allice & László Tábori (USC); Johnny Gray (pro)

•**PRs:** 400—45.98 ('12); 600—1:13.28 ('13); 800—1:42.82 ('12) (2, 4 A); 1000—2:17.84 ('10); Mile—4:03.26 ('10)

•**Major Meets:** 5h)NC, 6sf)US '05; 5)NC, 7)US '06; 7)NC, 3)US, 6h)WC '07; 3)NC, 6)OT '08; 8h)US '09; 2)USi, 5sf)WIC, 2)US '10; 1)USi, 4h)US '11; 1)USi, 3)OT, 4)OG '12; 1)US, 6)WC '13; 1)US '14

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** x, 9'06; x, 3 '07; x, 5 '08; x, 4 '10; 7, 1 '12; 4, 2 '13.





“To tell you the truth, I have pretty much a boring life. I just like to be home and just kind of be here with my son and my family and relax with my dogs.”

Solomon: No, actually what it was was more of a motivation because we were only doing pretty much strengthwork. We'd only been on the track maybe a month doing speedwork. It was purely just off of strengthwork.

So I knew that once we started doing speedwork I'd be ready to really do big things.

From that I knew the season was going to be great, and now what we want to do is get back to the strength—anything from mile repeats, repeat 800s on the road, 1200 repeats on the road, anything that's outside of the comfort zone—do a lot of mileage, build up that strength and then add in the speed.

T&FN: *You certainly confirmed your preference for front-running last year. Now that David Rudisha is back, do you think you'll be taking the lead when you face him?*

Solomon: I've thought about it a lot and I still feel that Rudisha is still not 100% yet; he's still very vulnerable. As far as leading or not leading, that's just kind of something where you have to go with the flow in the first 100 of the race and see how it progresses.

If he's there and I'm a little bit ahead of him, I'm not going to slow down to let him go in front of me; then I'll take the race.

But the first 100 will define how I'm going to race the race. If I'm leading or I'm waiting on him, either way I'm running aggressive and I'm not afraid of him.

T&FN: *How did you become a track athlete?*

Solomon: I started off as a basketball player, played Little League basketball, high school basketball. I started running very early but not competitively.

I kind of just ran to let energy out, just to kind of run. Then I'd get home and my mom would be, “OK, great, you're tired now.”

But we'd have Turkey Trots every year. It was about a half-mile for each Turkey Trot so each year I'd run a Turkey Trot and win and bring a turkey back for my mom. So she'd never have to buy a turkey for Thanksgiving. That was

kindergarten to 8th grade; she'd never have to get a turkey.

Then I got to high school and I joined the track team, kind of just for fun. It wasn't anything I was choosing or dedicated to. I ran my first year and I did OK but it was just to be part of a team. I was still a basketball player at the time.

Come my sophomore year I started making progress and then I joined the cross country team and started putting in more miles so I got a little bit more serious.

Come junior year, I was still a basketball player but then I started getting into track a little bit more. I made the State Meet, took runner-up, and then from there I decided, “I think I'm a track guy.”

T&FN: *You've said that at first you didn't really like track all that much?*

Solomon: It wasn't until my sophomore and junior year when I started getting better that I got the love of the sport, because I was winning. I won these races and I started to love the sport and wanting to do it all the time.

I was doing 2-a-days and summer camp in cross country, and in the summer other kids were going to Disneyland and Six Flags and I was staying home to go to cross country camp. That was fun to me so I started to love running. I think I ran about 1000 miles over the summer so I was ready for big things my senior year.

T&FN: *Later after you finished up at USC you didn't have a sponsor. That must have been somewhat difficult.*

Solomon: That was a tough time. I think I came out maybe at the wrong time. I came out the year of the '08 Olympic Trials. It was either hit or miss and I missed that year. I made the Trials final and I took 6th.

I thought, “I can maybe get a contract from this,” but it wasn't to be so I went a whole year without a sponsor. I just kind of ran races and wasn't running that well so I had to reevaluate if I wanted to do the sport still because it was hard to make a living. I was kind of getting doubtful about what my options were and I was still jumping through hoops about who wanted to coach me.

It was a very confusing time for me and I had to just get back to the point where I just had to want it. Then I started wanting it, and that's when I got with Johnny as my coach and the hunger started to come in.

T&FN: *How did you pay the rent?*

Solomon: I was still on scholarship with USC. I had another year of school but my eligibility was over so that's how I made it through that, and I was getting little stipends from USATF. Then in 2010 when I made the World Indoor team was when I actually got a contract with Saucony.

T&FN: *What was your first experience on the European Circuit like? Do you remember your first meet?*

Solomon: Yeah. My first meet was somewhere in Belgium [Brasschaat in '08]. I remember because I went there alone and I got lost trying to find our home base. For a whole day I was lost and then the next day I found the base, so I only had a day to rest and then I

Solomon — continued

raced the next day. I won the race so I thought, "It's OK, I can do this."

T&FN: *What did you do while you were lost in Belgium for an entire day?*

Solomon: The funny story is I took the train to where they told me, and I get there and I'm asking the locals if they knew where the base was, and none of them spoke English. I was there all night so I took a taxi back to the airport and decided, "I'm gonna wait this out because I don't know what to do."

My cell phone wasn't working so I had to call my agent and my mom collect.

But the funny thing is that when I'd taken the train to that train station I was maybe a mile or two away from the base camp. So I basically went all the way back to the airport, slept in the airport for that whole night.

I was miserable and I wanted to go home, I wanted to cry, I was hungry and I had no money because I'd used all my money on the trains and taxis.

I got a Moneygram sent to me and I took the taxi back to where I was before and I found the place and that was that. My first year my trip to Europe was a disaster.

T&FN: *Do you like the travel now?*

Solomon: I used to love it. This year it's the first year since my son was born and I want to be here as he learns to walk and stuff like that. It's always good to be around; you don't want

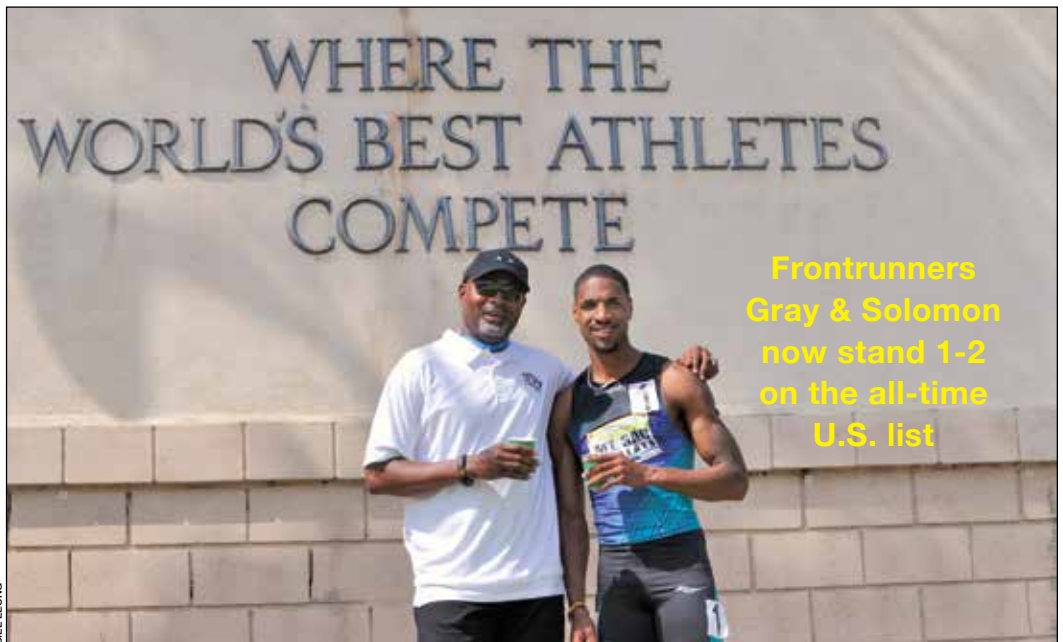
to miss too many things in your son's first year.

So traveling, I don't really like it so much this year, but next year I'm going to have to do what I have to do to make this Worlds team. That's what I have to do to pay the bills.

Next year, I think we're going to take the same approach that we took in 2012 and 2013, where we pick and choose our races; we didn't

great. They put us in the famous hotel, the Fairmont that they use in all the movies. Nice views, nice cars out there. That's probably my favorite meet.

Also, I always like Zürich, that's a great meet. And I always like Rome; I'm kind of a history geek. I'm really into the Roman Empire and the Greeks but I still haven't seen the



race too much and we didn't travel too much.

T&FN: *What do you like to do when you're not training and racing?*

Solomon: To tell you the truth, I have pretty much a boring life. I just like to be home and just kind of be here with my son and my family and relax with my dogs. I have an English bulldog, a pug and a poodle.

They all keep me pretty busy, and we try to stay out of the heat because it gets pretty hot out here. So most of the time we're in the house just trying to stay cool.

T&FN: *When you're on the circuit, do you have any particular favorite meets?*

Solomon: Yeah, the one I'm going to this week, actually: Monaco. That's probably every athlete's dream, to race in Monaco.

I remember when I was just another runner and I wasn't good enough to get into Monaco, I would always dream, "What if I could get into Monaco? That would be the greatest thing ever." And now I'm racing Monaco and this will be my third year racing there.

It's a great meet. It's very well organized, the fans out there are great. The hotel is

Coliseum yet.

T&FN: *A USC grad and you haven't seen the original Coliseum?*

Solomon: I haven't seen it in person. That's one of the goals in life that I have to achieve. I was in Rome this year, last year, and one time before that, but I'm not really one who likes to go sightsee before a race. Maybe if I can get there a little earlier next year, then I can maybe go and check it out. □

A Cross-Country Migration

How has Duane Solomon's cross-continental uprooting from Southern California to Florida treated him?

"It's actually gone pretty well. The weather is awesome out here. I'm a person that likes heat so if I can get in a little bit of heat it warms up my muscles and I'm used to it. It wasn't hard at all; it was just kind of getting used to the humidity and the heat, but once you get accustomed to it a little bit you're able to do it, and we train in the morning so we usually get through our workouts pretty quickly and out of the heat.

"At first it felt a little different. It still does a little bit. It seems a little bit more country out here. I'm used to the really urban life out there, the city life, big buildings and mountains and all that kind of stuff. But for the most part it's great. I still feel a little bit like I'm a tourist, a visitor here, like at heart I'm a Californian.

"With my new family, it just depends on whether we want to be out here for another year or two or relocate. It just all depends on how things work out, but for now everything's working out great and I wouldn't change anything.

"My son, Liam, was born December 27, one day before my birthday. He's a new addition to my family and he's been a blessing. Ever since he came he's motivated me a lot, giving me something to run for that really matters."

Big-Meet Lessons

London was a breakthrough for Duane Solomon, but then he slipped back a bit in Moscow. What did that teach him?

"The final in Moscow was just a race where I put too much pressure on myself and I choked. I just got to the moment and I choked, and I didn't know how to run with the knowledge I was one of the favorites. I didn't know how to run with such a heavy assignment on my shoulders.

"I just felt the whole season I was running great, my times were showing it. It was leading up to greatness there and I got to the big dance and I didn't perform so I just feel that from now I just have to learn how to get myself prepared for big races like that.

"London was totally different. I didn't have that demeanor of being a favorite. I was the underdog, really, and I came in with nothing to lose and ran the best race of my life."