

## T &amp; FN INTERVIEW

STEVE  
LEWIS

**I**t was just a dual-meet 400, but his 46.48 on a drizzly first day of April carried symbolic significance for Steve Lewis: it was his first individual outdoor race since winning the Olympic gold medal in Seoul at the age of 19.

The difference in stature of the two races also represents the difference the '88 season made in the life of the precocious Californian. He went from being a promising youngster to the highest success in the sport in just a few short months.

As his stature grew, so did Lewis's maturity, thanks to the support of his family, the inspiration of his UCLA teammates and the guidance of his coach, Bruin assistant John Smith. Those behind-the-races factors meshed with Lewis's extraordinary talent to produce the youngest 400 champion in Olympic history.

Lewis recognizes the place he created for himself, while also realizing that potentially even greater achievements lie ahead. Sitting with Smith in a Berkeley restaurant after his season-opening race, Lewis reflected on the year that changed his life—as well as his future:

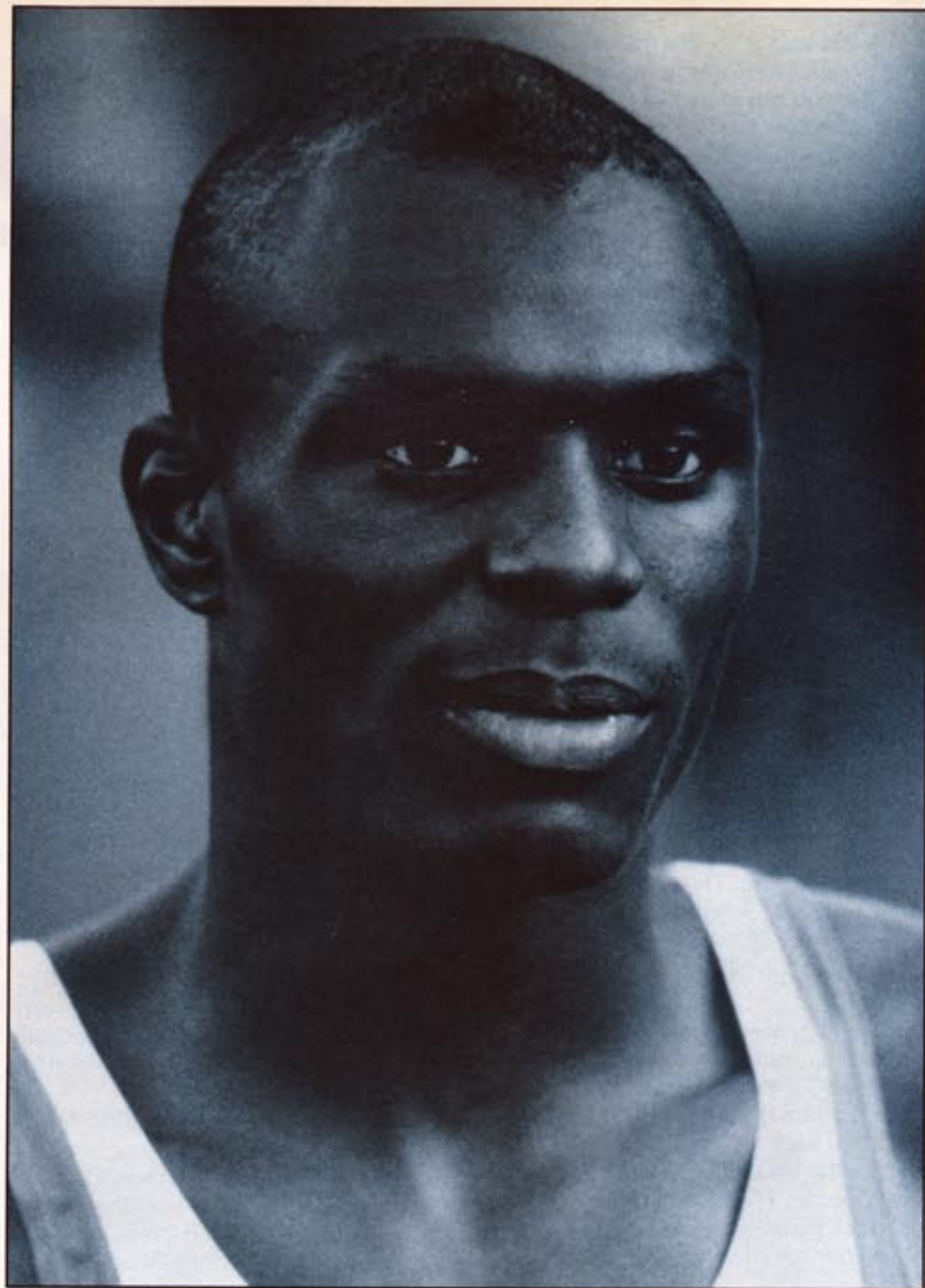
**T&FN:** What do you feel about all you achieved at such a young age?

**Lewis:** I feel it was a stepping stone to even bigger things. Whether it's a World Record in the 400—which has become a real goal—or shooting for records in other events, or trying for more gold medals, last year was just a beginning.

**T&FN:** In fact, what were your goals going into the '88 season? It was an Olympic year but you were fresh out of high school.

**Lewis:** Some early-season NCAA predictions—not yours—put me pretty far down in the 400. I thought, "I'm better than that!" So I wanted to run well at the NCs. And even before that, I thought I could get, maybe, 3rd in the Pac-10!

I had a shinsplints problem early in the season which hindered me a little. But I just kept getting faster, kept progressing. After a 2nd in the NCAA, I thought about the Olympic Trials. Then after the Trials, I thought, "A gold medal for sure."



ALLSPORT/Casey Mortimore

I really felt that, especially after I ran 44.11 in my Trials semi. I was king for a day. It was the fastest time of the year—at least for one day—and people really looked up to me. It was a nice feeling.

**T&FN:** It was a matter of taking things step-by-step, then?

**Lewis:** Yes, it turned out that way: Pac-10, to NCs, to the Trials, to the Games. And between the Trials and Games, I ran some major internationals.

Those meets helped my Olympic running because I ran against the top guys, like Innocent Egbunike and Butch and others. Plus I trained with Danny, so I was ready.

**T&FN:** It was a year of learning experiences.

**Lewis:** Yes, a year of stepping stones, with John being the mentor and Danny, Kevin Young, Henry Thomas and Mike Marsh being classmates. We were always striving to get a better grade from our teacher, with the final exam coming at the Olympic Games.

**T&FN:** What was the most important lesson Professor Smith taught?

**Lewis:** "Always strive to do your best." That comes into play with being successful at anything. When you give your very best effort, then things should fall into place.

**T&FN:** How did your achieve-

ments change your personal attitude toward your talent?

**Lewis:** I learned that any big achievements—like the Record was for Butch or the gold for me—can be major emotional adjustments. For me, what I did helped me conclude, "Hey, I'm good." It isn't just ego; you realize that it takes a lot to defeat you.

I acknowledge I'm the Olympic gold medalist, but I also know that now I'm the target for everybody. People will be getting stronger and coming after me, just like they did Butch. But I also know that anything is possible.

**T&FN:** *In the past, had you ever considered the term "Olympic champion" and all it means? Could you ever visualize yourself in that position?*

**Lewis:** I couldn't even conceive of being Olympic champion. And it didn't strike me right away in Seoul either. I knew I won, but I didn't experience it emotionally for a time.

I guess it's something you come to accept over time. But for me, it all happened in just one short year.

**T&FN:** *It appears you have gone from being just a frosh to a position of leadership on the UCLA team. But you seem to have no problem with that.*

**Lewis:** I feel that I'm following John's cue. When I first got to UCLA, I listened and basically did what I was told. But after last year and winning the gold medal, people now ask me the same questions I was asking John a year ago.

So I share with them the knowledge I've gained—I explain things to others in the same ways John explained them to me. But that's the way it is with a mentor and pupil, from Socrates through Plato, to Aristotle. The young spread the wisdom of the elders.

**T&FN:** *What has been the biggest adjustment for you?*

**Lewis:** There are so many new demands. One of the major ones is that you always have to watch what you do, what you say and how you act in public.

You never know who might know who you are. Before the Games, I might do something crazy in public, like 19-year-olds do. But now, I realize I'm a role model for a lot of people, so I have to watch myself.

**T&FN:** *It doesn't appear that is a tough thing for you to handle.*

**Lewis:** Honestly, it makes me feel more grown up. I like it in that way. I like to get dressed up when I go out,

lookin' good. And I've heard people say, "That's that guy who won the Olympics." They may not know my name but they recognize me and remember what I did.

Another funny thing is that I've

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## "Steve is both compassionate and sensitive, but at the same time he is a warrior."

—John Smith

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been places where people don't believe who I am. I tell them, and show them my Olympic team watch or ring, and they still don't believe it. I have to show them my driver's license!

**T&FN:** *They certainly are two very different persona, but how would you contrast the Steve Lewis on the track with the Steve Lewis off the track?*

**Lewis:** Introvert and extrovert. On the track, I'm more to myself. I don't want to be bothered when I'm getting ready to run because there is so much mental concentration involved. I want to focus just on what I have to do on the track.

Off the track, I'm much more outgoing and wild. [Laughs as Smith arches his eyebrows.] On the track, it's all business; off the track is the time for fun and pleasure. I like to go out dancing with friends, and or to the movies. I love comedies; they help me relax.

**T&FN:** *So everything isn't just track?*

**Lewis:** Everything has its own time and place. I've felt that many people really don't respect athletes very much. They look at athletes as just dumb jocks. Such people might respect an athlete as an athlete, but nothing else.

I feel that every person has God-given talents. Some people have abilities in math, or science or running fast. All of them put in hard work to improve their place and get better things out of life. It's the same dedication an athlete gives to his sport.

**T&FN:** *What would it take for any 400 man to run, say, 43.28?*

**Lewis:** I feel a lot would have to do with who is in the race. The world's

very best ran in Zurich, and in the Games.

But it's also important to run well when there isn't much competition. That's something I have to work on all this year. I'm a 43.87 quartermiler but I'll run against guys whose PRs are in the 46s, maybe 47s. So I'm going to have to learn to get out there and run every time.

The college level still is important because it can prepare me, train me, for what I want to do in the long run. I want to run well collegiately. I want to run well now so I'll be ready to do even better later.

**T&FN:** *John, what is Steve's strongest attribute as an athlete?*

**Smith:** One of the biggest things is his ability to focus on the race. Like last year, many people laughed at him; said he was too young and inexperienced. He took a lot of things that happened and focused that energy into his race.

He wasn't a quartermiler who said, "I want to try the 100; be a sprinter." He wants to run the 400, he's a very hard worker. I had to rein him in several times last year. But he also is intelligent.

As well, I have this idea with all my people: how do you hold the tiger at bay with one hand, yet with the other cradle and nurture the child?

Steve is both compassionate and sensitive, but at the same time he is a warrior. That is a very fine line, but a critical attribute in the truly great athlete. It enables him to deal with so many challenges he confronts, in sport and life.

The greatest ones have that innate sense, and Steve is one of the truly great ones. □

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Steven Earl Lewis was born May 16, 1969, in Los Angeles, and is 6-2/185. Graduated from American High School in Fremont, California. In 1988 he ranked No. 3 in the world after becoming the youngest man ever to win the Olympic 400. His 45.86 indoors this year places him at No. 2 on the American and collegiate all-time lists.

Other PRs: 100—10.68 ('88), 200—20.96 ('88).

His progression:

Year	Age	Affil		400	Major Meets
1979	10	CaEI	8	67.1	—
1980	11	"	9	62.7	—
1981	12	CaJH	10	59.0	—
1982	13	"	11	54.2	—
1983	14	"	12	51.9	—
1984	15	CaHS	Fr	50.8	—
1985	16	"	So	48.65	—
1986	17	"	Jr	46.50	1)Ca HS
1987	18	"	Sr	45.76	1)Ca HS, 2)TACJr
1988	19	UCLA	Fr	43.87	2)NC, 3)OT, 1)OG

by JON HENDERSHOTT