

STEVE WILLIAMS

Steve Williams doesn't think he had a very good year in 1974.

"Distracting," he calls it. Indoors, collegiate competition for San Diego State, invitationals and the championships distracted him, he feels, from being in his prime condition when he wanted to be most—during a near month-long trip around Europe.

A leg muscle injury suffered in mid-May hampered Williams until the AAU, but he still was able to run 9.2 at Modesto and a consistent trio of electric clockings at the NCAA (9.19, 9.19, 9.20 for second in the final). He lost to Ivory Crockett at Modesto, beat Crockett but lost to Don Quarrie at Kennedy and lost to frosh sensation Reggie Jones at Austin.

That bothered the highly-competitive, high-strung New Yorker, but he knew his time would come at UCLA in the AAU. Everyone would be there and he could get even with them all in one shot.

It was, speaking in heavy-handed metaphors, the shot heard 'round the sprint world: a world record matching 9.9 100 meters to down all those who had beaten him earlier. Then, seemingly inexplicably, young Jones outran a listless Williams in the USSR meet.

Once in Europe, though, Williams rolled—he won 11 of 13 races, ran four 10-flats and five 10.1's, tied the collegiate 100 yard mark (and his former world record mark) with a 9.1 and sped a 20.2 200, the fastest half-lap by an American this season. It was only his fourth 200 of the year.

Williams, frosh sensation in '72 before cut down by injury, who proved his greatness in '73 with that 9.1 record matcher and a stellar European tour, knows 1974 was a building year, building toward the most important meet two years hence in Montreal. Disagreements with coach Dick Hill prompted Williams to leave San Diego State's team, although he is still pursuing his degree in telecommunications from the southern California school. Now being coached by Brooks Johnson, Williams has his eyes focused on Montreal.

He is an excitable man, who talks excitedly when he is gripped by enthusiasm or anger. But lounging on his bed in his San Diego home while recuperating from a birthday party the previous night (he was 21 on Nov. 13), Steve Williams candidly and calmly examined the past season—and how it will prepare him for future seasons.

T&FN: You said the year was distracting.

Williams: Frustrating just as much. It seemed every time I was ready, really ready to run people, they were finding ways to avoid me. That really destroyed two major competitions for me, where I was ready to

run and drop something on somebody but they didn't run.

One was the Russian meet, which I had no business losing because physically I was just fine, in great shape. I was supposed to go to Paris after the AAU but I told myself that I was going to stay and run. I trained in Chicago and New York—I even ran the cross country course at Van Cortlandt Park. I waited until the last minute to go to Durham. The people there wanted me to do some PR, but I didn't want any of that. I wanted to step in there just in time to run. So I got there the day before the meet, ran a full workout and then I found out Borzov wasn't running. Ralph Boston told me and I was crushed.

T&FN: You felt totally empty then?

Williams: I had visions of running at least 9.9 again. Just before the AAU, the meet organizers got a letter saying Borzov would run, that he would be ready. I thought, "It's going to be legit now. I'm not going to have to hear this song-and-dance about he wasn't ready or he would just run the relay or stuff like that." He was actually going to be ready. That just warmed me up inside.

Then for him not to run really disappointed me. I stepped on the track and felt lifeless. The gun went off and Reggie got out well; I gained on him and I think I could have caught him but I had no motivation. As long as the US was 1-2 I just went "Eh, no big deal." I'm not that kind of person. I'm out there to win and I was really disappointed that I went into a mental lapse in that race.

Anyway, that was one disappointment. The other was the Cubans. Our first race was a good one. [Silvio Leonard nipped Williams at Siena, both in 10.0.] It was my clowning around that lost that one. I was leading and we got to the set of lines that European tracks have five meters before the finish and I went into my cruising, bullshit finish. But that wasn't the time to be gaming with somebody like him. I had been readying myself psychologically to run relaxed hundreds in Europe and because I would be competing a lot, I planned to run just enough to win in some of them. Then he came diving in and got it on the lean.

T&FN: We saw a report that he caught you and moved away from you when you both were at full speed.

Williams: Well I eased up at the lines. I can't say why. He was right there next to me and we both just leaned. I was cruising again; I had shut off and was coasting in to accept the trophy. But it wasn't over.

I was really mad at myself about it, but I realized I needed something to motivate me. So then we go to Turin and two hours before the meet, he announces

he's running the 200 and not the 100. I was so mad I said a lot of irresponsible things. They wanted to take some pictures of us on the track but I said I didn't want my picture taken with any who wouldn't meet me on the track. It was like two in a row and I was frustrated. Somebody said, "Well, that's the way they do things." I said, "What do you mean by 'they'?" Who else do you know who hides?" I was sorry for some of the things I said after all that happened.

But I was raised differently I guess. I won't give somebody the satisfaction of thinking I hid from them. I have almost too much faith in my ability. I'll step out there almost regardless of what's going on. That's why I competed at Modesto and Kennedy and the NCAA. I was hurt but I wasn't going to hide.

T&FN: You've said before that all the talk about "world's fastest human" doesn't interest you and that it's all manufactured by the media. Yet it's something people really identify with and gives legitimacy to the 100.

Williams: The 100 is one of the glamour events. The little kid playing in the street, the woman on the corner, they probably know about the 100. People easily equate a value to it. The mile and the 100 are the glamour races. People can easily relate to them. I never held much value to that "world's fastest human" stuff, but when it came around with Crockett, I really began to see the ludicrousness of the whole thing.

T&FN: Why particularly with him?

Williams: Well it was how fast the shift came. It shifted too fast from Borzov to me in '73 and from me to Crockett this year. Then Quarrie had it, then the next week Reggie had it, and after the AAU, I had it back. Then in the summer, Leonard had it and then Borzov got it back. What's the criteria?

T&FN: What do you think would make you the "world's fastest-human"?

Williams: I know one person who's the world's fastest at what he does and if I could do everything in the 100 he has done in his event, then I would be able to face myself in the mirror or I wouldn't cringe when someone introduced me as the "world's fastest human." If I could do all he has I would feel I deserved that title.

If I was Rod Milburn. Look at him—Olympic champion; lost two races in three years against the world's best competition; yards world record holder; metric world record holder; the 10 fastest times ever in the highs and his average, 13.16, is faster than any other man has run even once.

That's what I'm talking about—when your average backs up you're faster than

everyone else, when your record shows you're faster than everyone else, when you're Olympic champion.

I mean how can you be the "world's best" in anything when you don't even leave the country? That's why I think criteria are important. When I've done everything Rod Milburn has done, and that's a whole lot, then somebody can say I'm the world's fastest human and I won't cringe and feel that is such an unrealistic-sounding thing.

T&FN: Yet the idea of "the fastest" is a key one in the sprints.

Williams: Okay, I have a picture of Tommie Smith from '67 on my wall. He's doing it: his knees are up, his arm is back at a 45° angle, he's flying. I identify a lot with that period, '67-'68, because the sprinters of that era—Tommie, Carlos, Mel Pender, Jim Hines, Charlie Greene—had personality but sprinting was all business. They came to run, not play games like happens now. They had too much pride in themselves to hide. Greene ran the relay at Mexico on one leg. Tommie, too. Everyone was more gutsy and I've tried to model myself around those gutsy people.

T&FN: What were you out to achieve in Europe?

Williams: My main goal was to run as many 100-meter races in as many different situations with as many things happening as I could. So when I step on to the track at the Games—it might be raining or snowing or there might be a 90mph headwind, or I might have a strained hamstring and a pulled groin—I'm going to know how to go out there and win the 100. Things like concentration. In a race in Sweden my blocks slipped and I went down on one knee. But I got up and ran 10.1 and won. So if my blocks slip in Montreal, I will have been there before. Little things which all add up—because when you step out there in a big meet, everything is never totally right.

T&FN: How would you rate some of the people you met this year?

Williams: Borzov and Leonard are being very protected. I understand Leonard is being protected because he's very young—but I still don't like it. Leonard is good. There are few people whose style I like, but he's one. He's low to the ground and smooth.

T&FN: How about Borzov?

Williams: Don't know. He ran a good 200 at Durham, nice and smooth, an on-the-line technical race. But I didn't see anything fantastic. I can't objectively appraise people I run against because, first, I do compete against them and, second, the people I idolized were just too... too sweet running. It's hard for me to get excited over the people running now.

T&FN: Who do you think are the leading Americans?

Williams: Reggie is very good. So are Steve Riddick and Mark Lutz. If I'm going to take a relay baton from anyone, I want it from Mark. Man has a lot of heart. Del



Knut Edward Holm

"... my weakness is my ability... my strength is my determination."

Meriwether is good. So is Marshall Dill when he decides to do something. I've never thought much of little sprinters.

T&FN: What physical qualities are needed by a world-class sprinter?

Williams: He has to be a little more versatile than other runners. I always feel very confident in the 100 and 200 because they are shorter than my original distance, the quarter. It's physical endurance that helps compile a record like Rod Milburn's. Endurance, resilience, determination over a long period will carry you through. That ability to consistently go out there and put out is vital to a sprinter. He has to have endurance and I don't think many do today.

T&FN: Mental and physical endurance?

Williams: I don't mean to get on Crockett's case, but in one race he's the man. Okay, say you run 9.8 in the heats of the Games and 10.2 in the final. What's likely to win? One race don't make you and one race don't break you—except if it's the Games. That final can make you or break you in one shot. Aside from that, no one race will make you. You've got to run and run.

See, sprinting is mentally synthesizing physical reactions, computerizing them because there's no time for thought. It's programmed response.

T&FN: What are your strongest points as a sprinter?

Williams: Silly as it sounds my weakness is my ability. It carried me through too often and I fell back on it so often that I didn't have the motivation to become technically sharp. But now I'm working on technique—starts, rhythm—and I'm finding out how raw I am, how much I

don't know. But I know I'll be stronger and better when I combine technique and ability.

I think my strength is my will and determination. I can "will" myself into a frenzy over things. Maybe that's why, when I've gotten myself so high to compete and then somebody doesn't show up to run, it's so depressing.

T&FN: Would you ever like to go back to the quarter seriously?

Williams: I can't. The Games are too close. I wanted to run quarters early this year and then step down to the sprints for the bigger meets but it didn't work out. But it's time now to get down on technique. I'm a sprinter now—even though I feel guilty that I'm not doing all that hard quarter training. But the Games are too close.

T&FN: The Games are really the summit for you?

Williams: The top.

T&FN: What would you ultimately like to achieve?

Williams: Records in the 100 yards, 100 meters, 200 and 220 and golds in the 100, 200 and 400 relay.

T&FN: And the records clear, no ties?

Williams: A girl once said to me, "When are you gonna get something of your own?!" Women are some of my best critics; they say things a man wouldn't. I laughed and said I didn't know. But I know I'm gonna get it, no doubts. That's why last season was so pitiful to me; I was so ready for most of the year.

T&FN: And after Montreal?

Williams: Then anything. I don't know. I just may disappear for a while, go to someplace like Jamaica or Africa and hide out. Just lay back and live. □