

by Tom Jordan

TOM BYERS

Tom Byers calls 1981 the start of his third life. His first was that startling frosh year at Ohio State in '74 when he ran 3:37.5 in the 1500 to become the second-fastest Junior ever, behind only Jim Ryun (Tom is still No. 3). The second was the long oblivion from '75 through '80 when Byers seemed a talent adrift, showing occasional flashes of brilliance amid displays of suicidal pace or complete lack of form.

In 1981, Byers and wife Ann left their home in Ohio and moved to Eugene, to begin a stint with Athletics West. There, Tom met up with Oregon Coach Bill Dellinger, and their association has resulted in the third life, the rebirth of Tom Byers.

A fine indoor season started '82, with a PR mile of 3:53.6 at Millrose. Outdoors was delayed by arthroscopic surgery on one knee, but by late July, he was able to race, taking 3rd in the Sports Festival in 3:39.82. At Koblenz in late August, he finished only 6th, but ran 3:50.84 to become the fourth-fastest American miler ever. He finished the season with wins at the Fifth Avenue Mile and the Oregon International (3:53.18).

Shortly after that last race, T&FN talked with the gregarious Tom and the quieter Ann at their comfortable apartment in Oregon, with cats Lobo and Wilbur as an audience:

T&FN: What was behind your slump for those 6 years and your comeback this year?

Byers: When I ran 3:37.5 I thought, "This is going to be easy!" Run 3:37 this year, 3:35 next year, and get down there with all the big guys.

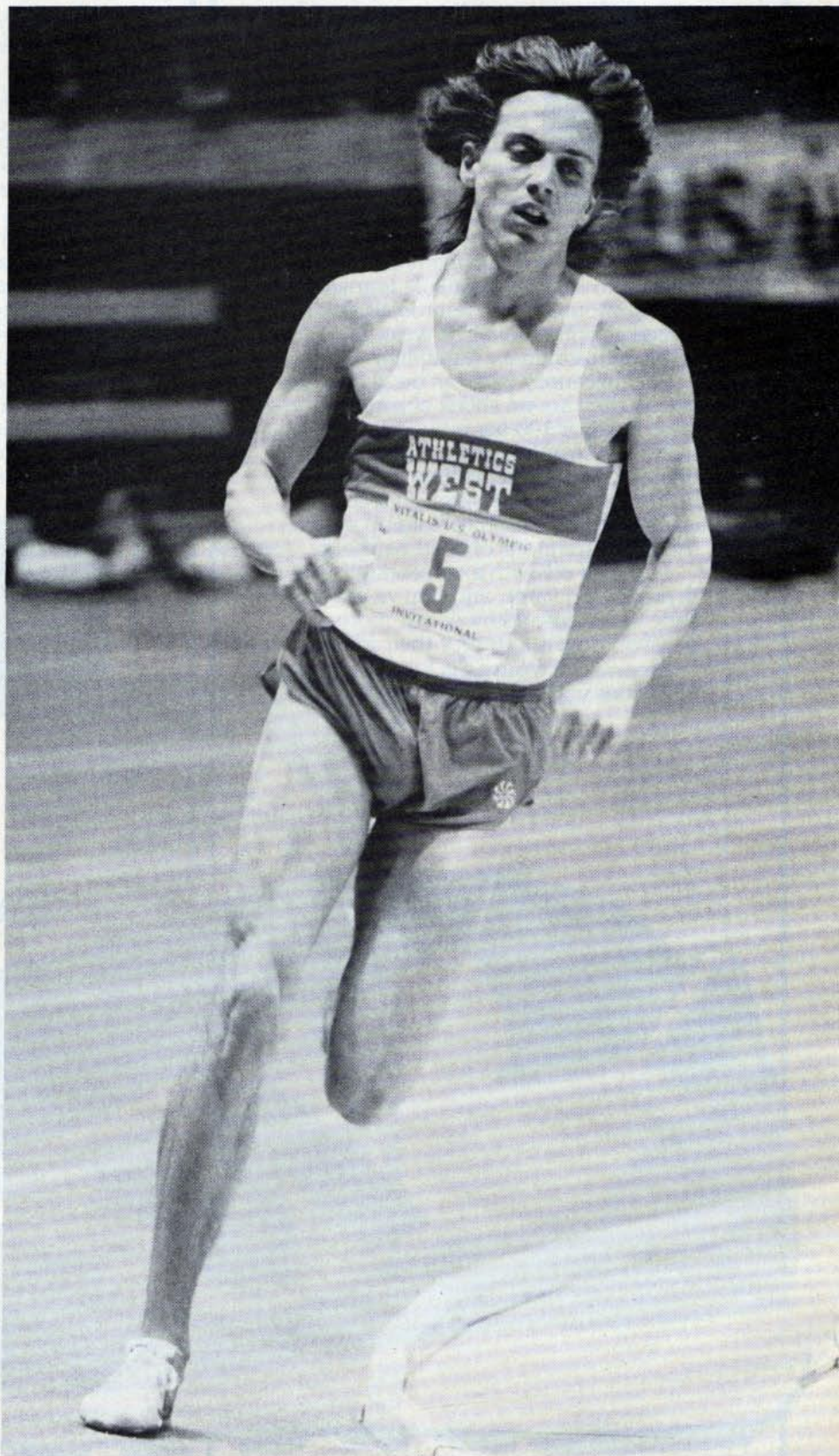
Then, all of a sudden, it left and I didn't know why. And the coaching, I'll just say that I didn't adapt to the coaching program I was introduced to after [Ohio State] Coach [Bob] Epskamp left. Things never clicked after that.

Then I met up with Coach [Bill] Dellinger and we've been working together now for almost 2 years. Today, it's Tom Byers in the same body and same hair, but it's not Tom Byers in the same mind. The reason being the influence Coach Dellinger has had on me.

I've always been a workout king. My greatest saying in my first life was, "If only the race was on Tuesday, I'd be ready." When I first came out here, Dellinger almost had to beat me with a bat to get that out of my system. You work out not to work out; you work out to race well.

T&FN: During the down times, did you ever almost flick it in and quit?

Byers: Yeah, quite a few times. I'd train halfheartedly. I'd get up at 5:30 so I could train, so I could be at work at 8:00. I'd get home anywhere from 6:30 to 7:30 at night and train and... (Those weren't the good old days, were they dear?) My



Paul Sutton/Duomo

aces weren't going well, so a couple of times I said, "It's time to join that other side of the world that doesn't run."

T&FN: *Are you all the way back to running now?*

Byers: Yeah, I think so. Right now, I would say I live to run, rather than run to live. My whole lifestyle is arranged around my training. It's like my job. If we want to go to a movie, that's fine, as long as I'm finished with my training.

T&FN: *So are you in it for the money?*

Byers: Oh, not at all! I'm in it because... I love the sport.

See, a lot of my peers have been in it since '75, '76. They've been on top all these years. I was on top, even though it was only for one year, and I fell about as far away as you can be. I couldn't even win a local mile race in town for a while because things weren't going well.

I used to sit in front of the TV set and see Walker and Scott and Lacy and Masback and say, "Golly, I used to beat those guys, and now, look at them, they're super, and look at me, I'm just Tom Byers, plain human." [Laughs.] So I've seen both sides of it.

And when we moved out here, I said that if I ever got to the point I once achieved when I was young, we're not going to get greedy; we're going to do it right this time.

So I'm not in it for the money, I'm into it for when I finish my running career, so I can say, "I'm Tom Byers, miler, and I gave it my all, and this is how fast I was able to run."

T&FN: *How long do you want to keep going?*

Byers: Oh, I wouldn't even begin to think about giving up track until at least 1988. I guess I'll be 32 or 33 then, but... another thing I feel that I have going is that during those 4-5 years when I was away from it, I was away from it: mentally I didn't have to worry about getting up for a race; physically, I put on about 15 pounds, so I really wasn't training that hard. So I got a rest for my mind and my body.

So now it's like going from my freshman year back in prehistory to now being... sophomore or a junior. So I've kind of erased those middle 4-5 years out of my life and saying, "We're picking up here."

T&FN: *Right this moment, are you the best miler in the world?*

Byers: Well... [clears throat] that's kind of a hard question. I wouldn't say the best at this moment, but over the last month, I would step to the line with anybody, and go into the race very confident that I could win whether it be tactical or straight-out type of race.

T&FN: *Say they had a 4 x mile in the Olympics and you could pick anybody in the world to be on your team. Your team is behind going into the anchor leg. Who do The Bible of the Sport*

you pick to anchor?

Byers: ... I would pick myself [laughs]; because I have the mental confidence now to run a race, and I have the physical training. And as the old saying goes, "Winning begets winning," and I've won, to me, a couple of big races over the last months. I think I could make up the distance on anybody right now.

T&FN: *What would it take to run 3:47, 3:46?*

Byers: I would say it wouldn't take any more mental preparation than I had this year. I think I could have run very close to that at the end of the summer season except that I never got in the right race. It's just going to take getting the perfect night again, with a rabbit who sets a great pace, and a competition where everybody is going for a fast time.

T&FN: *What did your own year of rabbiting do to you?*

Byers: The positive things were it got me into races which last year I wasn't qualified to be in. I got to toe the line against the so-called "big guys" and feel what it's like to go through the mental anguish and excitement of running in front of a European crowd and 50,000 people.

But I didn't know that so many negative things were going to be attached to being a rabbit. Your peers start thinking of you as a rabbit instead of a racer. And the press I've gotten in the last year has been, I'd say, negative press. Every race I win it's either an upset or they say something about "Rabbit Byers wins the mile." After I ran The Fifth Avenue Mile, I had to stop by home for a day on my way back, and the headline in the Cleveland paper was "Slow Rabbit, Byers, Wins 5th Ave. Mile." I'm thinking, "What is this?!"

T&FN: *So you'd never do it again?*

Byers: Never ever. I wouldn't rabbit for my best friend. I wouldn't rabbit for my mother!

T&FN: *Would you say that you are highly-strung?*

Byers: I'd say I'm high strung by nature. I used to be more hyper, but I think it was more of a false-hyperness. Before a race, I used to bound off the walls 4-5 hours before, because I didn't have confidence in the program I was on.

Now I'm still a high-strung person—it runs in the family—but I know how to control my expenditure of energy and save it for the race.

T&FN: *Is there a particular race you are peaking for in '83?*

Byers: The only thing for me is the World Championships. Because of my late start this year, we figured September 25 [Oregon International] and The Fifth Avenue Mile would be the ones to peak for. Well, next year the World Championships are going to be of special importance. That's the meet to be ready for.

T&FN: *Who do you think is the most talented miler in the world?*

Byers: Well, the runner who has

gotten the most out of himself is Sebastian Coe. The guy I feel is really a gutsy runner and who will dig down deeper than anybody I know—that has to be Steve Scott. The guy is super-strong, and I've seen him on TV where he's reached down and found that extra gear. I think those two guys are it.

T&FN: *Is the mile your best distance?*

Byers: I don't know. One of these days I'd like to try a 5000, but until we feel we've accomplished everything we can over the 800, 1500, and mile, we aren't even going to consider moving up.

T&FN: *What is the question most often asked of Tom Byers?*

Byers: ... "Why do you have long hair?" [Laughs.]

In high school, my hair was long one day, and my coach wouldn't let me run in the meet. And I think, "Goll, if someone puts that much emphasis on it, it must be important," so I guess I'm really saying something—I don't know what!

I think it fits my personality. I think I'm easygoing, and it represents somebody who's easygoing. It's how I'm used to seeing myself.

Plus, you put me 30m away from a mile field, and I can't tell Scott from Walker from Masback. The *real* reason I wear my hair long is I don't want to be confused with Steve Scott! [Laughs.]

T&FN: *You're quite an individual, wouldn't you say?*

Byers: Oh, I'd say so, in the sense that, believe it or not, I guess I'm considered a world-class athlete. But I don't view it as a special talent or anything, because I've seen the other side of the world. I was an office manager for a real estate firm, and there are a lot of people out there making businesses run—I think my father is probably one of the greatest people in what he does in his business—and they don't get any exposure we get just because we're in sports.

When I'm out on a run and someone comes up and says, "Hey, you're Tom Byers!" and I ask who they are and they say, "Well, I'm just an ordinary runner," I say "You're not; we all have our special attributes."

No matter how long I run, I'll have that attitude. □

Thomas Joe Byers was born April 12, 1955, and is 6-1½/157. Graduated from North HS (Columbus, Ohio) in 1973 and from Ohio State in 1977. Was national Junior champion in 1974, when he ran 3:37.5, which is still No.3 on the all-time world Junior list. Recently switched from Athletics West to the Oregon TC. TAC 1500 finishes: 2nd in 1974, 6th in 1981. His progression (with U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	Class	Affil.	800	1500	Mile
1973	18	Sr	Ohio HS	1:54.0y		4:18.3
1974	19	Fr	Ohio St	1:49.4y	3:37.5 (5)	4:00.1
1975	20	So	"	1:52.4y		
1976	21	Jr	"	1:48.9	3:39.9	
1977	22	Sr	"	injured		
1978	23		Ohio TC		3:41.3	4:02.48
1979	24		"	injured		
1980	25		MDAC		3:42.76	
1981	26		Ath. West	1:47.4	3:36.35 (4)	3:55.73
1982	27		"		3:35.75 (?)	3:50.84