

by Jon Hendershott

**H**enry Rono was still wearing his running singlet and sweatpants. He sat in his hotel room following an easy 5000 victory at the Jenner Classic, sipping on a Heineken and talking about the past four years.

*The greatest track athlete in the world in 1978—when he set World Records at 3000, 5000, 10,000 and the steeplechase—Rono is now more relaxed talking with people—and the press in particular—than at any time in his career.*

*He still clears his throat before answering each question, almost as though to give himself as much time as possible to put his thoughts in order. The lilting accent of his Kenyan homeland still gives a rhythmic quality to his speech.*

*The 30-year-old Rono has not only learned to relax around people. He has also learned about people in the past four years, and he has definitely realized that Henry Rono has yet to fulfill his enormous capabilities.*

*Open and friendly, he told us of his lessons of the past and his hopes for the future:*

**T&FN:** How did the success of setting four World Records in 1978, and the resulting fame, affect the life and running of Henry Rono?

**Rono:** It was something I didn't have a lot of experience in. Right after you break a World Record—and I was the first guy to set those four records in one year—people were so curious to see about me.

"Who is this guy?" People wanted me to go everywhere to run. When I was running in Finland, there would be a meet promoter from Italy. When I was running in Italy, there would be one from Japan, and Australia and New Zealand. All over, you know?

I know that I became confused; it is all such a new experience and you are not sure why people are so crazy about you. There was all the travel and changes in time and people pushing me to do things I didn't want to do.

People wanted me to go there and there and there and there. It was like they didn't even think I was a human being like them; I was an extraordinary person to them, a machine they thought could do anything.

The thing I didn't like was that people wanted you to do what they wanted you to do, not what you wanted to do. It was like they never thought about you as a person and what you wanted. I didn't like that; that was not the way I was thinking.

**T&FN:** Was it difficult to live with that fame? Did you get the feeling people were using you for their own gains?

**Rono:** Yes, it was a hard position for anyone to be in, anytime. People tend to treat you differently than they used to. Like last year, when people in Europe heard I wasn't running part of the year,



Theo van de Raakt

they were not interested in having me run in their meet. It was as if I was a nobody and had never set any records at all.

**T&FN:** You had a good year in '79 and then stayed out your senior year at Washington State in 1980 to train for the Olympics. But you were boycotted out of the Games a second time. You ran only a few races early in the '81 outdoor season before dropping off the WSU team. Why did you leave the team and not resume

*training again until early in the summer?*

**Rono:** What I wanted to do was just run one event, or maybe two later on in the season. I was confident about running the 5000, but the coach also wanted me to switch and run the steeplechase. But I hadn't practiced it—and I had some extra weight [he pats his middle] and that made it hard for me to go over the barriers.

Also, my head was not only just in running. I was in two worlds: going to

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school to finish my degree as well as running. I am the type of person who, when he does something, he doesn't like to do it halfway. I like to always give my best.

Especially being a world-class athlete, I never like to run a race in 15 minutes or something like that. Plus doing bad in one world affects your mind for doing your best in the other world.

I felt it would be best for me to forget about running until I could finish my degree. So I did and I got my degree in general studies last June. I'm still in school now at Washington State, getting a second degree in psychology.

**T&FN:** *You ran a 15:40 5000 in early July; did this cause you concern that something might be wrong with your training?*

**Rono:** About 2 weeks after I started training, I ran 13:57 in Finland. A few days later I had a very hard massage; I hurt all over because the masseur pressed me very hard all over my body. I was very stiff, but the meet director really pressured me to run this 5000 against Martti Vainio.

So I ran and I just wanted to finish the race. I ran 15:40 and I was lapped two times.

**T&FN:** *Was that not pretty insulting, the World Record holder being lapped twice?*

**Rono:** Well, I could hear the people in the stands [he sighs loudly]. Your name gets built up and attracts people and then they are disappointed if you don't do like they want. But I knew what the problem was, so I didn't get disappointed.

**T&FN:** *You later ran 27:40.78 at the Van Damme meet; in fact, you ran 13:12.15, that 27:40, then 13:12.47 and 13:12.34 within that span of about 16 days. What is the ability that Henry Rono has that enables him to get so fit so quickly?*

**Rono:** I feel it is mainly psychological. It is how you think of yourself, your behavior and how you interact with people. You get more information by meeting people; you learn from them and you can trade information. And where does it start? It starts from mental work.

So you want to train. Okay, what do I have to do? What is best for me? What works best for me? What is required physically? Twenty miles a day, five miles a day?

So you learn about running. You know through your previous training what works for you. If everybody is capable of running a World Record, then you have to learn more; you have to find the sources that can tell you more so you can become that much better. Before I ever even thought about trying to break a World Record, I tried to learn everything I could. What I could do, what I could create.

**T&FN:** *Were you ever close to your 1978 fitness in the summer of '81?*

*The Bible of the Sport*

**Rono:** It was a short period of hard training last year, not a period of long, steady training like '78. I knew last year that if I went up, I could also come back down very fast—if I ran a good race one time, I might not run as well the next time.

This year I started early and I just want to keep continuing my training and winning all my races. Racing, and winning, is a part of my training. And that helps me know what I want to do in the future.

**T&FN:** *And what is that?*

**Rono:** Well, before this summer, I plan to run 2M at the Pepsi meet in May and I want to run 8:10-8:12. Running that will let me know if I have the possibilities of running 5000 under 13:00.

The good thing about being in top shape to run a time like that for 5000 is that you can channel your energy to the 3000 or the 10,000 and they are no problem. At least I feel that way.

I feel that with me there is the possibility of running 10,000 under 27 minutes. And 7:28 for 3000 meters.

For the steeplechase, I don't need any endurance work there. I will just go and train for hurdling; work on flexibility for the hurdles. The water jump is no problem for me, but the hurdles are a problem.

**T&FN:** *Can you estimate how much better shape you will have to be in compared to 1978 in order to run the times you want?*

**Rono:** To run even those times, I won't have to be 100% fit. Physically, that is. I think in the race against Salazar I was 100% mentally fit. But to be in the position of being 100% fit physically, well, I have never been that fit.

**T&FN:** *How would you grade your record performances in '78?*

**Rono:** About 85%. I think I was about the same when I ran two hard races in one day in college meets. But I have never been in 100% fitness in my life.

Last summer I was very fit; I ran the last lap in my 5000 record in 56, so that told me there was still some energy there. So as I get more fit, I feel good about running those times: like under 13:00 and under 27:00.

**T&FN:** *How do you feel your career has been affected by the two boycotts which kept you out of the Olympic Games?*

**Rono:** I trained just for the Olympics, driving myself just for that. I expected to run against guys like Salazar, and the Finns and British and other Africans. Then that was taken away by people not involved in sport and it was very unfair to the athletes. There was no consideration for the athletes.

So many of them spent a lot of time, 4 years' time, getting ready. And then they were used by politicians and they were frustrated.

I feel cheated that I have never been able to compete in the Olympics. My

chances were taken away when I was very ready physically. I have found that it is more important to be an Olympic gold medal winner. Here in America, you can say that you hold World Records—but it doesn't mean as much because there are so many records in so many sports.

But say that you have an Olympic gold medal and that means much more. You have something special and you are special. The Olympics are the most important.

**T&FN:** *So that is an important goal for you, especially since you have missed competing in the Olympics twice?*

**Rono:** Yes, it is important. If all I cared about was World Records, I wouldn't even go to school. But I went to school to prepare for the Olympics and I stopped going to school in 1980 to prepare especially for the Olympics.

Like Ovett and Coe went to Moscow and they became known around the whole world. They won and I want that opportunity, too.

**T&FN:** *When you were in college, there was a lot of open antagonism by many people toward foreign athletes going to American colleges. Why do you feel there were such bad feelings toward foreign athletes, the distance runners from Kenya prominent among them?*

**Rono:** Maybe Americans thought we were taking advantage of the education, of going to school here. Sometimes, people said we took the chances of a scholarship away from American athletes.

I think one of the main reasons was that the foreign athletes would go to the NCAA and win, so the American athletes would not win the medals.

People thought we came here just to run, but we came here to learn, too. And Americans have the chance to meet us and learn from us. The American athletes can run against us and learn what it is like because they might meet us again in the Olympics or other big meets.

And people said we are all so much older than American athletes. Some foreigners were, yes, but not all. But what about the experience Americans gained from competing with foreigners?

Like Salazar. We have run against each other many times and he has learned that he can run against anyone. He has learned he is one of the best in the world. And we learned from him. We all make a contribution to each other.

**T&FN:** *When you first came here, were you not that aware of the idea of black versus white?*

**Rono:** I didn't think about such things at all when I first came here. But after being here and learning attitudes, I feel that you have to be very aware and conscious that you are yourself.

Sometimes, Americans label you because of their prejudices. They see you as only black. They don't see you as an individual person. And that's how children





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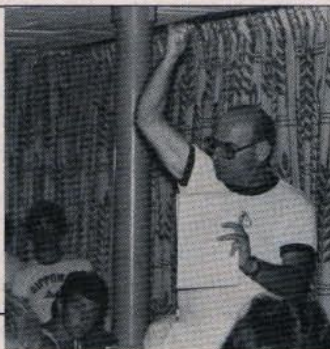
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are taught, to label. It prejudices them, too.

T&FN: *Does it bother you that some people would judge you as a person solely on the basis of the color of your skin?*

Rono: It doesn't bother me. I want to be looked at first as a person; I want to be judged first as a human being, not because I'm black or anything else. I want to be judged as an individual person, not just lumped together with a whole society of people. I want people to know me and what I think and feel and believe, and not just label me with a general group.

T&FN: *In 1978, there were death threats made against you. It must have been shocking to know that some people felt so strongly about the presence of foreign athletes on U.S. college teams that they would threaten someone's life. What did you think of that?*

Rono: It was more confusion than anything else. I was new here; it was hard to understand that people could feel that way. It was scary, yes; it caused me to have ulcers, so it affected me very much.

But it was more confusing than anything else, because I had never been exposed to such a thing before. I came from a place and from a family where there was love. Your achievements were rewarded positively.

T&FN: *How are you regarded by your countrymen back home?*

Rono: People still look at me as an important person. People want me to come back there to live and work. I told them that I would like to finish another degree in school and then later on I may go back.

I would like to go back to my country, but the most important thing to me is to go to the Olympics. That is the most important goal in my life. It is even more important to me than World Records.

I know that when I run in the Olympics and do well, it will be good for my country. I mean, I have been here a long time, eight years by the time of the next Olympics. I have received my education and have made many friends there.

But I have stayed here because of the Olympics, because I can prepare for the Olympics here. That is the most important thing I want to do. □

Henry Rono was born in Kenya on February 12, 1952, and is 5-7/140. Won 6 NCAA titles at Washington State (1976—cross country; 1977—indoor 2M, cross country; 1978—steeple; 1979—steeple, cross country). Winner of steeple and 5000 at 1978 British Commonwealth Games, the season for which he was voted Athlete Of The Year. Holds World Records in 4 events: 8:05.4 in the steeple ('78), 7:32.1 for 3000 ('78), 13:06.20 for 5000 ('81, breaking his own 13:08.4 of '78), and 27:22.4 for 10,000 ('78). In the 5000, he has 5 of the 8 fastest times ever. His progression, with World Rankings in parentheses:

| Year | Steeple     | 5000         | 10,000        |
|------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1975 | 8:34.4      | 13:37.0      | 28:58.0       |
| 1976 | 8:29.0      | 13:30.8      | —             |
| 1977 | 8:31.12     | 13:22.1      | 27:37.08 ( 1) |
| 1978 | 8:05.4 (1)  | 13:08.4 (1)  | 27:22.4 ( 1)  |
| 1979 | 8:17.92 (2) | 13:19.65 (7) | —             |
| 1980 | —           | 13:19.8      | 27:31.68 ( 3) |
| 1981 | —           | 13:06.20 (2) | 27:40.78 (10) |
| 1982 | —           | 13:37.5      | 27:29.90      |