

T&FN Interview

by Tom Jordan

TOM BYERS

Rarely does one encounter a world class athlete as exciting, and as excited, as Tom Byers.

The lithe (6-1/156) Ohio State freshman first burst on the track scene with a stunning 2:06.6 indoor 1000 last winter in only his fifth race over the distance. Then followed a "slump" during which the 19-year-old Columbus native finished last in the NCAA indoor 1000 and outdoor mile finals. But Byers came surging back, literally and figuratively, to finish second (3:37.9—worth a 3:55.3 mile) in the AAU 1500 behind New Zealand's Rod Dixon and first (3:39.8) in the US-USSR Junior meet.

Besides qualifying him for the US-USSR Senior dual, Tom's AAU finish placed him 5th on the all-time US list, and gave him the second all-time world Junior performance behind Jim Ryun's 3:36.1.

Only a 4:18.3 miler last year, Byers has quickly acquired a reputation as a strong, gummy runner, not afraid to lead. And although he is the fastest 1500 runner in the US this year, the open and unspoiled Byers, who laughs easily and grins a lot, still seems as surprised about his current successes as anyone.

T&FN: Did you think you could run 2:06 for the 1000?

Byers: Well, I don't know. Coach (Bob Epskamp) kept telling me all indoor season to run it like a half mile; that I'd have enough left. So in the Big 10 meet, I just ran my 1:51 half and then, I could kick. It shocked me that I could kick. I'd never believed him. Same in the (AAU) 1500: I just ran it like a three-lapper instead of running it like a four-lapper.

T&FN: What about the NCAA (12th in 4:18.1)?

Byers: I think I just got psyched out. I ran really hard in the semi-finals (4:00.1); well, back then it seemed really hard. I really don't have that much confidence and I was so happy to make it to the finals, and I saw all these big names, like Tony Waldrop and Paul Cummings, and wow!

T&FN: You certainly came back at the AAU. How do you explain it?

Byers: I really don't know. It's hard to say . . . I think a lot of those guys just had a bad day. Like Len Hilton won it last year, and Michael Howell, or Howell Michael . . . I'm not sure how it goes. I just put together a good day, and I think they had an off day. 'Cause, you know, I really can't see me beating those guys and I'm just in a shock from doing it. Gosh, last year I couldn't beat the best milers in the State of Ohio.

T&FN: Yes, what about that? From 4:18 to 3:55 is a big drop. What caused it?

Byers: One reason is Coach Epskamp's

philosophy of a lot of distance running. In high school, I don't think I ever got over 25 miles in one week, distance and quality. Now, I'll do 5-7½ miles every morning and then at night I might go out for 10 miles and then come in and do a couple of intervals.

T&FN: How do you feel today?

Byers: I'm awfully tired because Saturday I did a hard 22 miles. Saturday is my distance day.

T&FN: I guess so. Is that patterned after the Lydiard training?

Byers: No, just happened to be the distance I ran.

T&FN: Has your training given you more confidence in races?

Byers: I'm starting to believe in myself a little more; not much, but I've recently been running my kind of race. If they go out too slow, I'm not scared to take the lead. My weakest feature is when they go out in an unsteady pace. I think that's how you can kill me off. That's why if they go out in 57, I'll go out in 58, and if they slow up, I'll keep my same pace; so, if I have to take the lead, it's something I'll just have to do for now.

T&FN: Do you get psyched up for your races?

Byers: Oh very. And very nervous too: go to the bathroom 10 times . . . I'm one of those guys.

T&FN: How did you get started in track?

Byers: (laughing): I went out for football in high school; I was too small for it, but our coach gave me a try at it. We had a mile-and-a-half time-trial and I lapped everybody. So the cross country team guys told me that if I came out for cross country I could letter as a sophomore and that sounded pretty neat.

T&FN: What about goals in the future?

Byers: Just to keep improving. Maybe make the Pan-American team. That'd be great. If I stay relatively injury free, I think I could keep improving. Of course, I'm going to shoot for '76. That why we're out



Chip Gane

here.

T&FN: Do you feel ready for the US-USSR meet?

Byers: I hope to win, but the Soviets, they put their half-miler, the guy that was supposed to run against Wohlhuter, in the 1500.

T&FN: Aw, Arzhanov's only run around 3:43 for 1500.

Byers: Yeah, but supposedly the best junior kid that I ran against last week was 3:50 flat, but he ran 3:40.8.

T&FN: Did you know that your AAU time was the second fastest ever by a Junior?

Byers: Yeah, I heard that and I'll be gunning against the Russians. How fast is the record?

T&FN: 3:36.1 by Ryun.

Byers: I don't know . . . 3:36 is awfully quick, but maybe I'll have a good day. All I know is that I'm going to give it about 150% in Durham. □