



Bill Leung, Jr.

Thom Hunt: Good Sense & Good Times

by Randy Johnson

In Roget's *Thesaurus*, the verbs "hunt" and "track" are categorized as being similar in meaning. And in the world of running, hunt and track are synonymous, especially when it comes to college freshmen.

San Diego's Thom Hunt, who a year ago was one of America's top high school distance runners, is gradually building his way to prominence at the University of Arizona.

It was in February 1976 that Hunt set the national high school record for the indoor mile at the San Diego Jack-in-the-Box Indoor Games. Facing the likes of Filbert Bayi, Rod Dixon, Paul Cummings and Wilson Waigwa, Hunt was able to run 4:02.7, shaving nearly four seconds off the old record set by New Jersey's Vince Cartier.

Visiting his East San Diego home recently, Hunt reclined on a yellow sofa and recalled that super evening: "I was pleased with the race. For me, at the time, it was a great race. I ran to my potential that night. I was just going for everything I had, and my main goal was to hang on for as long as I could. I figured if I hung on until I had at least a 660 to go, I could start kicking with what I had and I could still run a good time."

Not one to dwell on his accomplishments, Hunt is always working to improve. He came home to Southern California this Feb. 18 to compete again in the Jack-in-the-Box Games where he raced Frank Shorter and Rod Dixon in the two-mile. He placed third with a time of 8:35.1, 10 seconds faster than his previous best.

As he got up from the sofa and walked toward the kitchen table, Hunt's wiry frame seemed to be held together with rubber bands instead of tendons and muscles. But at 5'8" and 120 pounds, Hunt is running dynamite.

During his first college season, he placed a remarkable 13th in the NCAA Cross-Country Championships.

"My whole cross-country season, everything I did mentally and physically, was peaked for the NCAA," Hunt said. "In the early season, I was training through everything. I was not psyched up; I'd just get out there and I'd run. I didn't win a race all year. Terry (teammate Terry Cotton) was

Above: World champ Hunt (22).

running really strong, and I really didn't want to put any performances in. I didn't need to, and it wasn't hurting me a bit. A lot of guys would be getting worried. They'd say, 'Oh, my first college season. Look, I'm getting blown out.' I ran a lot of bad races, but I was expecting to. I didn't want to be running a lot of good races."

Hunt was quick to point out that he was the fifth American at the NCAA after WSU freshman Henry Rono led a parade of foreigners to high places. Hunt, who will be facing Rono for the rest of his collegiate career, is disenchanted with the American running system.

"Actually, I really enjoy running against foreigners," he said, "because you're facing the best competition, and that's the way to improve. But the one thing that is screwed up is the American system. All America has going for it now is the college system.

"I think if all the foreigners were 18 when they came over, there would be less complaining, because then they would be running on the par with American youths. It seems kind of funny that the Americans are developing the foreign nations' programs and not their own."

a runner to move to the easier stride and less exertion.

An alternative to the running is a continuation of the guided imagery into an experience of heaviness and cleansing. The leader continues with instructions:

"Now, imagine a valve in your side. Open this valve and let the light airiness escape. Continue until you sense your body laying flat, totally devoid of internal substance." (Allow 2-3 minutes for the experience.)

"Begin to visualize yourself filling up with a heavy, clean oil. Beginning with the places where your body contacts the floor, see yourself slowly filling up with this heavy substance. Continue until you are sensing yourself as a dense, heavy presence.

"Again, open the valve on your side and let the heaviness leave your body. Feel the relief of this experience. As the oil leaves your body, it dissolves the pain, anxiety and self-recriminations which you have built up inside. You can see all of these traits becoming smaller and smaller particles, eventually dissolving in the oil and disappearing out of the valve in your side. Let the emotional heaviness that you have accumulated blend with the oily substance and allow yourself a released cleansing.

"You may feel an emptiness now that you have not experienced before. It may be like the spiritual cleansing associated with religious rituals. Again, open your valve and begin filling your body with the lighter-than-air substance. On the inhale, draw in the helium or spun cotton. As you become full, go into your feeling of being, of presence, of awareness, and experience what it is like to feel internally light and airy. Feel the purity of the moment.

"Now, begin to return to your ordinary sense of reality by taking deep breaths into your abdomen, and visualize yourself breathing out through your fingertips. As you gradually come back to consciousness, slowly open your eyes. Remember your sense of internal lightness where the being dwells in purity. Carry this feeling into this day's physical activity."

VISUALIZATION

When preparing for a run, images often are helpful as a support mechanism. For instance, stand quietly and build a mental picture of a giant hand, as large as your back, gently pressing your body forward. Continue this image during the training session. If you have trouble with the hand image, try an image of a skyhook descending

from the heavens, attaching itself gently to the body and pulling it along.

Another exercise first was introduced to us during a session with Robert Nadeau, the Aikido master. It is aimed at deepening one's understanding of the inner body and allowing this inner sense to guide the physical expression of erupting energy. It is an excellent ritual to use before training or in preparation for a race.

While in a standing position, allow your attention to be drawn inward and focus on the first two physical locations which come to mind. With eyes closed, breathe slowly and evenly, allowing your concentration to fill the selected body parts. When you have attained a rapport with these locations, open your mind to any images which flow through. Allow the first image to possess your body and become the main image. Allow the second image to carry your body into motion as you express the inner energy in spontaneous form and movement.

In a demonstration of this technique, Nadeau chose the lungs and the small of his back for concentration. As he allowed the images to direct his body, he visualized two rods which raised his arms straight up and lifted him toward the ceiling. At the same time, he felt a stream of water propel him forward. He subsequently experienced a release of energy from his upper torso which allowed a greater breadth of physical mobility.

The techniques described throughout this article have been synthesized from various schools of yoga, meditation, the Oriental martial arts, gestalt therapy and other self-awareness disciplines. They have proven to be worthy additions to the training regimens for the variety of runners with whom we work. To add to our repertoire of mental practices, we are drawing from contemporary research in such areas as medicine and biofeedback.

In Fort Worth, Tex., Dr. Carl Simonton and his wife, Stefanie, incorporate visualization and meditation into their treatment of cancer patients. Based on the premise that an individual's mental and emotional processes are significant contributors to the creation of cancer, they teach their patients mental techniques to combat their pathologies.

Through slides, films and personal discussions, the patients learn of the complex cellular processes which create and sustain their organic disorders. They are then taught to visualize a scenario

in which their natural immune systems are seen fighting the cancer as a healthy body does.

The Simontons' results indicate that this mental activity is a significant support system for ridding the body of its disease. We are experimenting with similar techniques for application to the various physiological problems associated with running.

In recent years, biofeedback research has demonstrated that individuals can learn to control various physiological functions through appropriate visual or auditory feedback from monitoring instruments. Relief from pain, warming or cooling of parts of the body, control of blood flow and muscular relaxation can be mastered quickly through biofeedback training. All of these internal processes could expand one's running skills.

In addition, we recently learned of the first successful attempt to willfully manipulate the blood-sugar level of a person's body. We wonder just how far this directed self-regulation can go. Will there be a day when the conscious runner plays his physiology through an inner guidance system to maximize performance? We think so.

As described in part one of this series ("Beyond the Physical Limits," March '77 *RW*), researchers in the Soviet Union are deeply involved in this aspect of athletic training. Their "psychic self-regulation" (PSR) techniques emphasize the mastery of breathing rhythms, the achievement of warmth and coolness in selected body parts, and the voluntary increase or decrease of heart rate. Visualizations such as an energizing shower or a cool rub-down usually follow an athletic event. We are beginning to incorporate some of their ideas into our training routines for runners.

In contrast to the increasing interest in drug-induced physical development, we encourage the application of mental techniques to support and expand physical capacities. The joining of the spirit and mind with the body in mutually supportive roles is a new frontier. With an understanding and integration of these dimensions, the extraordinary potential for growth inherent in the athletic experience will emerge.

In the long run, we believe that an appropriate balance of mental and physical discipline will outdistance the drug-induced qualities now being cultivated. For us, running with the inner self is an adventure unparalleled in sport, and it is there for all to experience. ●

The International Cross-Country Championships were run in March at Dusseldorf, West Germany. There, Hunt had his chance to run against foreign athletes his own age. (He was 19 on March 22.) Making the US Junior team for the second year, Hunt, who finished second to Eric Hulst in 1976) entered the race as the favorite and lived up to his billing.

He'd said before the race, "I think right now I can compete with any guy my age on a solid level."

Hunt was born in Texas and lived briefly in Nebraska before moving to San Diego, his home for more than 17 years. He became interested in running early, as his father was a track coach and took him to all the large local meets.

Hunt ran occasionally with his father, but he was not permitted to train until he attended high school.

"Before 10th grade, I never trained at all," Thom explained. "When I was really young, I would run in some age-group meets and I was involved with running. I would go out and run with my Dad once in a while, which was slow, and I thought it was great fun. But I never did any training."

In ninth grade, Hunt proved he had natural talent by running a 4:49 mile. That time dropped to 4:19.8 the next year when he began to train.

He ran an average of 50-60 miles a week in 10th grade and carefully increased it to 80-85 his final year at Patrick Henry High School.

Hunt went undefeated his senior year in cross-country and set a record on every course he ran, including the notable Mt. San Antonio College Invitational where he outkicked Eric Hulst.

Last spring, Hunt raced to lifetime bests of 4:02.7 and 8:45.2 in the mile and two-mile with relatively little speed work. His training was based entirely on consistent distance running, and he relied on races and fartlek runs for his speed.

"I don't do much in the way of interval workouts," he said. "It's similar doing it the fartlek way—you're getting the same benefits. I feel I can get more out of it and I enjoy it more. I might get on the track maybe once every three weeks, but that'll be the most."

Although Hunt is now facing college competition, his training methods have changed very little.

"Right now, I'm doing 85-90 miles a week with 2-3 or 4-5 'twice-a-days,'" he explained. "They're basically slow, with

a fartlek once a week. I try to vary it with a fairly strong sub-six (minutes per mile) road run."

During most of his daily runs, Hunt cruises patiently at a seven-minute pace.

"Most of my road runs are easy," said Hunt, who plans to major in physical education. "I go out and mess around, and jive with whoever I'm running with and pull practical jokes, and it's pretty fun."

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hunt is not concerned with running high-mileage weeks.

"I'm only 18, and I still have 20 years of good running, so there's no need for me to be running 120-140 miles a week and grinding it right now. Maybe in five, six or eight years I'll slowly pick it up, but there's no need to do that now."

Hunt sends out a message to young runners, warning them not to become too intense too early in their careers.

"There's nothing wrong with running at an early age," he said. "It's good, really, but I don't think it should be too serious. I would recommend that a kid do LSD (long, slow distance), fun running."

Once again, Hunt brought the subject back to scholarships and the American system, explaining how the present situation doesn't allow a young runner to develop in this low-pressure manner.

"If you want a scholarship now, you have to do something in high school," he said. "It forces some people to train too hard, too early. I was kind of like that, but I wasn't training that hard."

There is no doubt about the versatility of Hunt, who has set records from his indoor mile to his 2:24:02 marathon. (The time stood as an age-17 record until Clancy Devery broke it this February.) Hunt has many talents, but rather than focus on any one event he wants to have fun running all of them.

"Basically, I run for fun," he said. "One of the fun things of running is good, hard, competitive racing. In a race, if you're running to your potential, that's fun. I know there are some people who are good who don't enjoy it all that much. They're just doing it because they're good and want to accomplish some things."

Having had his share of races with world-class athletes, Hunt takes his competition matter-of-factly.

"Most of the time," Hunt said, "I'm out in the race to do the best I can with the situation presented. I try to take things in stride. I'll get nervous and get

ready for the race, but I just try my best not to let it affect me."

Hunt is not one to worry and lose the race before it begins. Instead, he follows a very definite routine to prepare himself for the effort.

"I don't do any worrying at all," he said. "I really don't, because there's nothing for me to worry about. I'm just going to do the best I can, and that's that. Why worry about it?"

"The main thing I try to do is go over the race in my head—the strategy and what I want to do—and think over the different possibilities. You've got to be prepared for things. I've never been one for a big pep talk. Mostly what I do is mentally present the race in my head and get myself to put out the best I can. Mental preparation is sometimes the difference between a good and bad performance."

What happens if he loses?

"I try not to dwell on any bad performance," he said. "The main thing to me is not winning or losing but running the best I can for the time."

At the AAU Cross-Country Championships, Hunt ran for the Jamul Toads Track Club and placed 77th after leading the pack for the first two miles. He confirms that the San Diego-based Toads weren't fluke winners at the national race.

"We'll be tougher every year," he said.

When interviewed, Hunt was preparing for his first collegiate track season and setting his goals once again for the NCAA finals.

"I want to qualify in the 5000 and 10,000 and the steeplechase," he explained. "I want to hit the qualifying time for each of those events and then choose whichever one I feel I can do best in."

While still a junior in high school, Hunt ran 14:18 for 5000 meters and covered a 10,000-meter cross-country course in 28:55. He has run 29:46 on the track.

Is Moscow a goal?

"Not right now," Hunt said. "In 1979, it might be. I don't have any ultimate goals for right now. I don't try to set my goals too high."

Hunt is possessed with exceptional talent and a clear head. Overconfidence is not his style; he simply knows where he is and where he's going.

"Running is my life," he admits. "That's what I do best and am devoted to. Even if I was just an everyday competitor, I would still be out there running." ●