

MOTTRAM NEW KING OF THE OVAL

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Six laps to go, and race leader Craig Mottram appears giant-like in comparison to the duo of 5 foot, 6 inch, 110 pound Ethiopian runners attempting to draft off the Australian distance runner as the pace quickens even more. The remainder of the race field has faded into the distance, struggling just to maintain form and move forward. Four laps later, Mottram makes his move, turning on the afterburners and leaving his Kenyan rivals in his wake. Over the final 200 meter lap, Mottram possesses the confidence to pump his fist in the air and fire up the sold out Reebok Indoor Games crowd that sits trackside. Clocked in a blazing 54.98 seconds while celebrating over the final 400 meters, Mottram virtually shuts it down before hitting the tape to claim victory in 7:39.24. It's an Australian indoor record, and celebrates with a victory lap and high fives to the front row audience. Clearly, Craig Mottram is a track and field fan favorite.

Less than a week later, Mottram returned to competition, running the prestigious Wanamaker Mile at the Millrose Games at Madison Square Garden against top flight milers Bernard Lagat and Alan Webb. Despite the critics' predictions that Mottram's large frame is simply too inefficient to excel on the narrow turns of the Garden's oval track, Mottram's led the race with less than 2 laps to go before letting Lagat squeeze past him for a narrow victory. Mottram holds on valiantly for a strong 2nd place finish, and again earns the praise of his audience. And while many distance runners seem in awe of the Ethiopians and Kenyans, Craig Mottram clearly has their respect and attention.

Most recently, the 26 year-old Mottram outran a stellar field to win the 2 mile event at the Prefontaine Classic in 8:03.5, knocking eight seconds off his own Australian two-mile record. It was the fastest two mile ever run in America. When asked of his ability to drop the competition over the final laps, Mottram's televised response of "it comes down to the size of your balls," drew plenty of media attention. Yet there wasn't a runner in the field who could argue with his blunt assessment.

In a profession dominated by African athletes, Craig Mottram hasn't back down one bit from his rivals. Mottram's running resume boasts a bronze medal at the 2005 World Championships in Helsinki at 5,000 meters, making him the first non-African to medal at that distance since 1987. At the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, Mottram earned runner-up honors in the 5,000 meter event, running 12 minutes, 58.19 seconds for the distance. A two-time Olympian and former junior tri-athlete, Craig Mottram has run 3:48.98 for the mile 12:55 for 5,000 meters. And he continues to improve as a distance runner.

Mottram's focus with Coach Nic Bideau is on the 5,000 meter race at the World Championships in Osaka, Japan in August. Olympic and World champion Kenenisa Bekele, who Mottram has beaten and did not race at Prefontaine, is anticipated to run the 10,000 in Osaka, setting up Mottram in position to possibly become only the second non-African to win a World Championship at this distance (Ireland's Eamonn Coghlan, another perennial fan favorite, won the first World Championships 5,000 meter race in 1983). Based on his preparations to date, expect to see Mottram in contention when the final bells sounds.

Craig Mottram has already drawn plenty of comparisons to the late Steve Prefontaine, another brash, young track star who spoke his mind and possessed both the heart and the wheels to back it up. Both also put in plenty of hard work. Mottram's training is somewhat unique in the fact that he maintains a high level of aerobic fitness nearly year round, supported by a strong diet of steady miles (consistently 90-120 weekly), long repetition intervals, and specific-pace runs. It is this type of training that allows Mottram the ability to compete against the best in the world at distances ranging from the mile to 10,000 meters. Craig Mottram is certainly receiving plenty of attention from the track and field community. With an outstanding combination of strength and speed, accompanied by plenty of heart and a sampling of showmanship and swagger, Craig Mottram is the type of athlete that the sport of track and field needs.

Race Update

The Norwich Recreation Department Summer Road Race series kicks off on Thursday, July 5th and will run for eight consecutive Thursday evenings concluding on Thursday, August 23rd. There is a ½ Mile Kid's Run beginning promptly at 6:30pm, followed by a 1 Mile Fun Run at 6:45pm. The 3 Mile Run begins at 7:00pm. All races begin and end in the center of Mohegan Park and there is no cost to participate. Contact the Norwich Recreation Department at 823-3791 for more information.

Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at www.moheganstriders.org. He can also be reached by e-mail at kdcsikorski@sbcglobal.net.