

Mary Decker matures into top-ranking miler

By KIM SPIR
Of the Emerald

Eugenean holds world records

Mary Decker, a world record holder in distances traditionally dominated by Eastern Europeans, isn't the same pig-tailed, gangly youngster who threw a relay baton at the back of a rough-racing Russian half miler six years ago.

At 21 Decker is considered an adult, but she says, "I really don't feel any different than I did before."

"I want to be the best at 1,500 meters

outdoors, and all my races up to this point have been a progression to those things. And I don't feel any pressure, really, outside of the pressure I put on myself."

Decker, a veteran in international competition, set world records this winter in the indoor 1,500 (4:00.8), mile (4:17.5 on an oversized indoor track) and 880 yards (1:59.7).

But she wasn't thinking about records when she began running "just for fun" at age 11. "It was a social activity more than anything."

At 14 Decker was ranked fourth in the world in the 800. At 15 she had set her first world record, captured an AAU 800 crown and achieved veteran status in international competition.

Decker was favored for a 1976 Olympic berth, but after the 1975 season she seemed to disappear after being sidelined by calf pains so severe that she was forced to give up running for a while.

Countless doctors and specialists poked, prodded and examined her calves, but they could not stop the pain began if she moved at any pace faster than a walk.

In 1977 while attending Colorado State University in Boulder, Decker met Dick Quax, a close friend who is now her coach. Quax explained that she might be suffering from something called Compartment Syndrome — when the sheaths of tissue surrounding the muscles don't expand as the muscles develop.

"Right now I'm not in as good a shape as I'd like to be, so at the trials and at the nationals I will be running in races that will give me competition."

Quax told Decker that he had undergone operations to correct the problem and encouraged her to do the same. Two operations, one in 1977 and another in 1978, preceded her return to competition — and more records.

Now Decker is protective of her body. She warms up thoroughly before each run or race and has taken a common sense attitude in training and racing that many injury-prone athletes are adopting.

"I was reading that Sports Illustrated article on Mary Decker," said NCAA All-American Bill McChesney in March. "She had to get over the guilt of getting up in the morning and saying 'Yeah, my foot hurts. I'm not going to run today.' That's what I've got to learn to do."

Decker explained her attitude change to Track and Field News' Jon Hendershott following her 880 world record earlier this year.

"In the past I had a tendency to train hard every single day. I ran everything hard because I thought it would make me better. But now I know that's not the case."

"If I'm tired one day or something is aching I'll take it a little easier. I have to

give my body a chance to rebuild itself instead of wiping it out day after day...."

Decker had to use that patience with a recent injury that set her training back three weeks in May and June. Like McChesney, Decker experienced pain in the bottom of her foot because of plantar fasciitis, a common overstress injury.

She layed off to let the foot heal. Although she had planned to run the 800 in the Prefontaine Classic, Quax, who is now in Eugene, advised against it.

"It's (the foot) pretty good now," she says. "My training (approximately 60-70 miles per week) is going well, but it's just that I don't have a lot of races behind me at this point."

The AAU (800 meters) will be my first race. The trials will be my second, but by the time I get to the finals of the trials I'll have had four or five races under my belt (counting heats and finals)."

Decker's immediate goal is to win the 1,500 in the trials, her first. Her current time is almost 11 seconds faster than any other American metric miler, but she doesn't underestimate her competitors.

"Right now I'm not in as good a shape as I'd like to be, so at the trials and at the nationals I will be running in races that

will give me competition. Later on, when I'm fitter, well, it's hard to say. They (other American runners) just haven't been running that well yet."

Because Decker is faster than other American women, her training is a rather solitary affair. "I do have people who run with me on occasion, but I pretty much train on my own."

"I guess it is tough to train by yourself, especially when you have an off day, but when you look at the fact that I've had to run all my races basically all alone...I think I was able to do that off training by myself."

Decker keeps her future plans to herself, but she says she would like to compete in Europe following the Olympic Trials. As for times, she says records are meant to be broken and Decker wants to be the one to break them.

But she says that attitude doesn't distract her from the fun of competition and most importantly, the desire to win. "I run a race, first of all, to win."

"That's not thinking about time. When I'm feeling good, though, I start thinking about going for time, and then the effort of my race becomes very conscious. But first I want to win."

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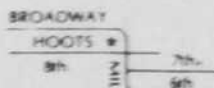
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