

# ALBERTO!

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Every year since 1981, he has been voted road racing athlete of the year by *Track and Field News*. Part of that vote acknowledges his American road records at 8,000 and 10,000 meters; much of it acknowledges his ability to chew up opponents on marathon courses.

A reporter from *Track and Field News* once asked Salazar if he'd ever fully extended himself in a marathon. The reply: "The day I really take chances, I don't think anyone'll be in it at the halfway point."

And so it was that experts once claimed Salazar untouchable in the marathon. More specifically, they called him unbeatable.

"I had no doubt that it was just a matter of time, before I found something or I just snapped out of it. It was frustrating, but I knew it was a matter of time." — Alberto Salazar

In 1983, the untouchable and unbeatable one was touched and beaten. At the Rotterdam Marathon on April 9 of that year, he finished fifth, far behind Australia's Rob de Castella. Later, he was fifth in the prestigious Fukuoka Marathon in Japan.

It is now conceded that Salazar is not a shoo-in for marathon gold Aug. 12 in Los Angeles. De Castella, who has a best of 2:08:18, has not lost since 1980. Japan's Toshihiko Seko, with a best of 2:08:38, is equally dangerous.

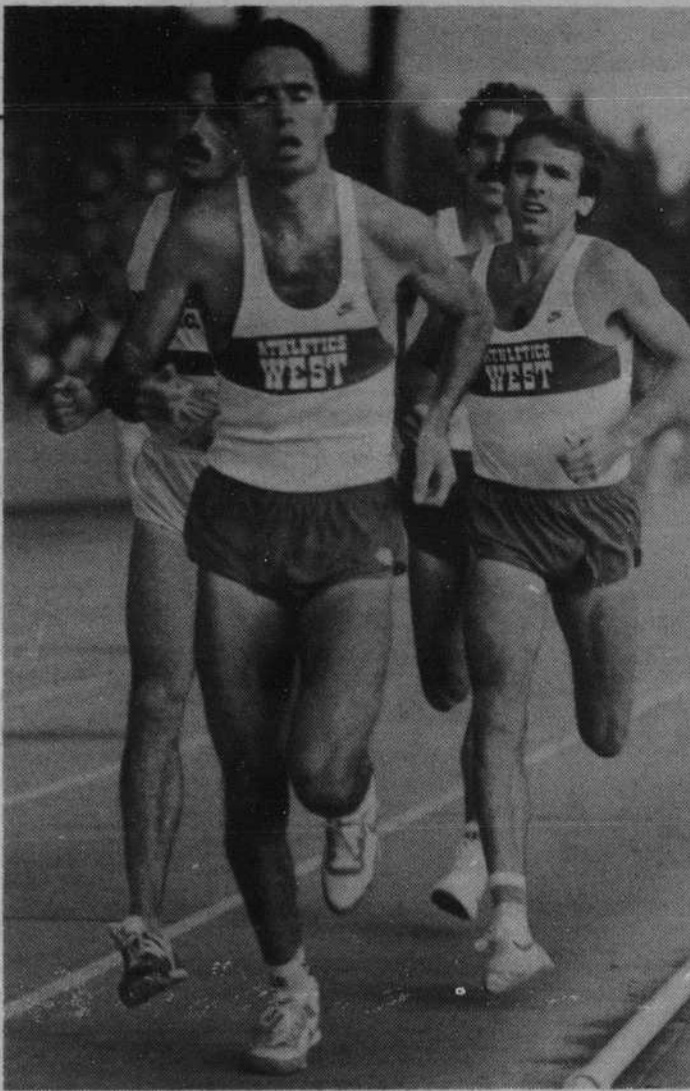
It is also conceded that 1983 was a year to forget for Salazar. At the 10,000 World Championships at Helsinki, Finland, in August, he finished 17th — dead last. He fought bronchitis at about that time. Soon thereafter, he was diagnosed as having an iron deficiency problem.

Suddenly, documenting Salazar's mortality became very fashionable. In 1982, when he'd edged Dick Beardsley and won the Boston Marathon in 2:08:51, he had nearly collapsed afterward. His body temperature fell to 88 degrees, he was treated for hypothermia, and it took injections of saline solution to bring him back.

That was nothing compared to 1978. Then, he'd come perilously close to death after the Falmouth (Mass.) Road Race. His body temperature surged to 107 degrees. He was packed in ice. The priest was there to read the last rites. Somehow, Salazar survived.

What everyone forgets is that Salazar had his moments in '83. He won the U.S. Cross Country Championship. He won the TAC 10,000. He set a 10,000 road-race record.

This year, iron supplements are helping Salazar rekindle his strength, and he's proved some points on the track. In a special 10,000 at Hayward Field April 7, he ran a 27:56.47. He lowered that to 27:45.5 at the Mt. Sac Relays in Walnut, Calif., three weeks later.



After donning the red and white of Athletics West, Alberto Salazar went on to set American records in the 5,000 and 10,000 meters and a world record in the marathon.

"Down at Mt. Sac, I was 20 seconds off my best," says Salazar, "and before, when I ran my best times, it was off of two weeks of light mileage — 70 miles and then rest. When I ran at Mt. Sac, I had over 100 miles that week, and the week before 130. I was still tired and training through it, so that's really encouraging."

"Even though he has the world record in the marathon, the amazing thing to me is the 13:11 he ran for 5,000. When Al did that, Billy (Rodgers) called me up and said, 'A 13:11, can you believe that?'" — Bob Sevene

Sevene is not the only one in awe of Salazar's versatility. It can safely be said that no other runner in the world can match his collective times from 1,500 meters to 26.2 miles.

How many marathoners can run the mile in 4:01.9 and the 1,500 in 3:45.5? Salazar has. How many marathoners have run the 5,000 in 13:11.93, the 10,000 in 27:25.61? Salazar has.

No other runner comes close to matching him for combined road-track greatness. For comparison's sake, take Greg Meyer, a victor at Boston in 1983 and a marathoner with a reputation for slick 10,000s. His PR in that event is 28:23.

"That is his unique quality," says Tabb. "A

2:08 marathon doesn't scare me, but a 13:11 5,000 and a 27:25 10,000 are not in my range. His track times are so superior to mine, it's amazing."

Says Dellinger: "I have had other runners who I think could have moved up — I think Jimmy Hill could run a pretty good marathon — but Alberto is the only runner who went out and did it."

In 1982, Salazar really did it. If 1983 was his year for being mortal and admitting he could fail, 1982 was his time to rejoice over his invincibility.

Incredibly, he won New York (for the third straight time), surged to a win in his first try at Boston, and finished first in a whole slew of road races, including Falmouth. In the summer of that year, he set his pair of American bests. At Stockholm, Sweden, there was the 13:11.93; at Oslo, Norway, the 27:25.61.

The 10,000 ranked him second in the world and remains the fifth fastest ever. The 5,000 is less spectacular — seven men have bettered him at that distance. 1982 was certainly a year of bliss, coming on the heels of his marriage to Molly and his dramatic world-record delivery in New York.

"I sometimes wonder how the heck we can do it — maybe it's in our genes." — Ron Tabb

In all likelihood, only those who have emerged healthy from a marathon can understand the splits Salazar runs. When you break his 2:08 into 26 pieces, you find that he has averaged a 4:54 mile for the entire distance.

For the average person, that is insane, unachievable and unthinkable rolled into one.

"I liken it to taking a college test," says Salazar. "It's two hours long, but you're concentrating so hard the entire time that it passes by quickly. The training runs are boring and they seem like they take forever, but the race itself passes quickly."

Yet there are those 4:54s to consider. Or, as Molly Salazar interprets it, "The majority of us can't do one of those."

Salazar does 26 of them in a style that defies grace. When he races, his eyes are nearly closed, his body appears to sag, his every breath seems his last.

Not that anyone can look graceful running a marathon. Salazar once called it, "an invading kind of pain, gradually taking over your entire body."

What is important, instead, is what Salazar has done for road racing. He has helped transform the marathon from some freak show into a respected race.

"When he came to Eugene, he was very caught up in the Oregon mystique — Prefontaine and the ride in the car and all that. I think Pre was Alberto's idol then, and I think he'd be an idol and a friend if he were alive today." — Bob Sevene

When he graduated from Wayland High School, Salazar was ready to decide between Oregon, the Naval Academy (where brother Richard

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