

Following is an interview with Joe Sax, written and published in Athletics Magazine in 1981

Joe Sax

In 1977 the Canadian Cross Country Championships were held in Hull, Quebec. The senior men's course involved 12,000 metres of agonizing brutality; a week's rain had covered all but the mountain and the rock quarry with an inch of water, and the river had swelled to twice its normal size.

Of particular concern were the stones and rocks that lay hidden beneath the leaves and the water. The muddy conditions demanded that the runners wear spiked shoes, but the stones made spikes dangerous; a runner's foot can be twisted much more easily in spikes than it can be in flat shoes.

We reviewed the course the day before the race and spent the better part of the next eight hours debating about which shoes to wear. It was Joe Sax who finally came up with the right answer.

"Seems to me," he said, as though he was satisfied that the debate was thus resolved, "that if we wear our flat shoes, we'll be running just to survive unharmed. But if we wear our spikes we'll be going all out. We might hurt ourselves, but if we don't, then we'll know we gave it all we had; we'll be going for the win. Do anything else and we'll be running, not racing."

Understand that, and you'll know a lot about Joe Sax, a complicated individual who loves to run and loves to race, but knows that there is a world of difference between the two.

I've known Joe for about twelve years, first as an opponent, now as a team member and friend. At first I saw him as most people do, sometimes loud and boisterous, occasionally quiet and shy, always laughing and grinning. It took me three years and lot of hard workouts to recognize another side of him – an introspective and perceptive side, determined and extraordinarily tough.

In the summer of 1978 Joe was the defending Canadian Champion in the 3,000 metre steeplechase, but a nagging leg injury had slowed his training to a virtual standstill. The National Championships, held in early July in Montreal, were also the first trials competition for athletes looking for a spot on the National Team that would represent Canada at the Commonwealth Games, to be held later that summer in Edmonton. Joe ran gamely but could not hold onto the leaders, and finished well out of contention for a spot on the team.

A week later the second and last Commonwealth Games trials took place in Edmonton. Once again the pace was fast, but this time Joe was doing the work, pushing hard, running beyond all reasonable expectations.

And that is just the point; Joe never let reasonable expectations get in the way of a good effort. He won the race, grabbing the last spot on the National Team, and ran just six seconds off his own National Record in doing so. In all likelihood he was not in as good physical shape as were the other athletes in the race, but only Joe understood the significance of the race. Only Joe knew that there was just no point in finishing second.



That same leg injury put an end to Joe's career as a track runner, eleven years after it had begun. The word involved in being the country's best steeplechaser was too much for his Achilles' tendon, and Joe abandoned the track in 1979, uncertain of his future. He spent six or eight months training irregularly, then decided that he would give road racing a try. His leg, unable to cope with the stress of hurdling steeple barriers, seemed to adapt well to an increase in mileage on the roads, and he found himself with a new incentive to train.

Joe made the transition to the roads look easy. In the next two years he ran some impressive times over 10 and 20 Km, and beat well established runners in winning several local races. He resumed a regular training pattern and increased his weekly mileage, trying to add stamina to his track speed.

In 1980 Joe won the Blossom Festival 20 Km. Run, the Canadian 20 Km. Championships, and placed third in the Sunday Star Trek, a 20 Km. Run in Toronto. But his most impressive effort came in the fall of 1980, when he tackled the marathon for the first time.

Pitted against some of the best runners in the world, including Bill Rogers of the United States, Sax placed third in the Labatt's Toronto Marathon in 2 hours, 17 minutes, 12.8 seconds, an incredible time for a marathon debut. He was the first Canadian home, and one of the last to leave the post race reception; he had missed being an international class athlete, and it felt good to be back.

Joe is a school teacher with the Etobicoke Board of Education. His wife, Betty, just gave birth to their first child, a boy named Michael James. He was born in Toronto, went to Danforth Technical High School, and received his Bachelor's degree at the University of Toronto.

All of his fourteen years as a runner have been spent with the Toronto Olympic Club, under the direction of Paul Poce, his coach. To the rest of the athletes in the club it seems as though there was never a time when Joe didn't run with T.O.C. To them he is more than a club member; he is an institution. He is the embodiment of the club's spirit, a leader, and more than anything, the club comedian. And when Joe doesn't make it to workout, their group is lessened by more than one.

The interview:

Athletics: You've been running for 14 years now, which means that you started long before the current boom in fun running. What attracted you to the sport in the first place?

Sax: I ran in a field day at my high school when I was in grade nine, and broke the school record for the 3000m. After the race the school coach came up and told me that I wanted to run Cross Country.

Athletics: So you had some early success?

Sax: Yeah, I guess so. When we went to races in high school our coach used to give the first five finishers a ride home in his car, and everybody else had to take the subway. I always got a ride home with the coach, so I guess I did alright.

Athletics: What do you enjoy most about running?

Sax: Well, I certainly enjoy the racing more than the training. But if you mean what aspect of the entire sport do I enjoy the most, it's the people. I get to hang around with a lot of quality people; people who are self-directed and know what they want, people who are serious but a lot of fun to be with.

You also find a lot of very unselfish people. One of the greatest things that I ever saw was the way our

Toronto Olympic Club team worked together last fall to win the National Cross Country Championships. We worked incredibly hard, pushing each other, talking to each other, helping each other out. Sure, everybody was doing it for themselves too, but you just don't find many situations where a group of people will work so hard to help each other. We nearly killed ourselves to win that championship, and I think we each did it for the other guys on the team.

Athletics: You have a strong attachment to your club and Paul Poce, your coach. Can you tell us why?

Sax: I've always run for T.O.C. and I guess I owe them a lot. When I was just beginning to show some potential a lot of guys in the club tried hard to help me along. I remember Bill Peel, Bob Fahy and Ergas Leps in particular, helping me understand what it takes to be competitive. And I learned more about mental toughness from Fahy than I could ever hope to learn anywhere else.

And, of course, Poce has been terrific, but he's a different sort of guy to work for. He's great for guys who already know what they want, who know where they are headed and need some advice on how to get there, but he doesn't seem to have much time for people who don't work hard, or don't know where they are going. And he is quite flexible too; he can coach just about any type of distance to athletes of all levels.

Athletics: What do you consider are your strong points in a race?

Sax: I'm pretty tough mentally, I think. I don't want to be immodest, but I think I can out-duel a lot of guys just because I'm a little tougher than they are.

Athletics: And your weak points?

Sax: Just the opposite. Mentally I'm pretty strong when I think I've got a chance to do well. But when I don't think that I've got a chance I'll fold. When I'm not running well I tend to give up at times.

Athletics: You surprised a lot of people by running so well in the Labatt's Toronto Marathon last year, and I know a lot of people were watching you when you went to Boston for the marathon there last month. What were your thoughts before the race?

Sax: I was just hoping to get a good time, say around 2:13:00 or so. I knew that I couldn't go with the leaders, so I hoped to find a group of guys running at a 2:13:00 pace and tuck in with them.

Athletics: And what happened?

Sax: I went out with the leaders. There were so many guys in the front pack and they were all going nuts, running way over their heads. But I figured I couldn't let them go or I'd have to run by myself. I kept looking for a second group to form so I could run with it, but that just never happened.

Anyway, I eventually ran out of steam. I knew I could stick it out and still get a good time. But I started to weaken and I began to slow down. With about five miles to go a friend came out on the road and grabbed me, telling me to stop. I don't like to drop out of races, but a marathon is different than any other race. I figured that if I dropped out, I'd be able to start training hard again in a couple of days. But it would have taken me a couple of weeks to recover if I had insisted on finishing.

People always say that your second marathon is the toughest. Well, I'm glad that it's over with now. Now I can start training seriously again.

Athletics: Your experiences with running in Canada have been fairly unique. You have won five individual and five team titles in National Championship events. You were the national record holder in the steeplechase for five years, and have represented this country in international competition on more than 15 occasions. Now that an injury has forced you to leave the track and take up road racing, have you had to re-adjust your goals or your way of thinking?

Sax: Not really. I ran track for about twelve years, and I did just about everything that I wanted to do, or could do for that matter. Road racing is new to me and it has offered me a whole new set of challenges. Road racing has helped me run more effectively, and I'm enjoying the change.

Athletics: So you don't regret the lost chances for international competition. I know, for instance, that most track runners aspire to run in the Olympic Games. Did it bother you to lose that opportunity?

Sax: I don't think about it too much, but I'm not that impressed by the Olympics. I was left off our Olympic Team in 1976 when I thought I should have gone, and the 1980 Olympics were, of course, boycotted. With that kind of stuff going on the Olympics ceased to be an attraction long ago. They are too political. I would much rather finish in the top ten in the Boston Marathon than run in the Olympics. It should be the other way around, and it really is too bad, but politics have changed the Olympics to the point where they just don't matter as much as they used to.

Athletics: What, then, are your goals in road racing?

Sax: On a philosophical level, my goals haven't changed. I still think that the most important thing is to run well, as well as possible. I'll never be a jogger.

No, I take that back. I didn't mean that.

All I mean is that I'll never masquerade a mediocre performance by telling myself that it was good. I'll always insist on running as hard and as fast as I can.

Practically, I am still aiming for a fast marathon – a good time. For me I think that means somewhere around 2 hours and 13 minutes. I'd be happy with that.

By John Craig