

Track and Field



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The Surprise of the Final Straight

There was only talk of the two British runners, Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett, before the 800-m final of the 1978 European Championships at Prague. Indeed, the former clocked the first lap faster than any runner had ever dared to do: 49.32 sec. As he weakened in the final straight, his compatriot challenged in fine style. While the two fighting fellow-countrymen raced side by side to "breaking point", a large shadow, wearing the dark blue vest of East Germany, burst through. This was Olaf Beyer, for whom a second place in the European Cup and a seventh place in the World Cup had not succeeded in gaining recognition the year before. The German went past inexorably and broke the tape in first place, while the lighted score-board indicated 1 min 43.8 sec: fifth best world performance ever and the world best for 1978.

For an athlete who had only just finished third in his country's national championships, this was rather breathtaking. Before arriving in Czechoslovakia, his personal best was 1 min 45.8 sec (3 min 37.1 sec in the 1,500 m also). And there was Beyer finding himself at one stroke

one-tenth of a second outside the Italian Marcello Fiasconaro's European record and four-tenths of a second outside the Cuban Alberto Juantorena's world record!

Only his colleagues had no cause for surprise. Hadn't Olaf, when 15 years old in 1972, won the 800 m for his age group of the Spartakiades, the open competition which has supplied East Germany with more than one champion? And, as well as that, wasn't he almost as good in the 400 m and the 1,500 m? A future teacher of physical education and mathematics, Beyer—who was completing his military service at his moment of glory in Prague—put his muscles and his knowledge of figures to good effect in this event. Ovett, of course, had his revenge in the 1,500 m.

OLAF BEYER

Born Aug. 4, 1957, in Grimma, East Germany

AWARDS AND RECORDS

1978 ECH: gold medal, 800 m, 1 min 43.8 sec; 9th, 1,500 m in 3 min 39.7 sec

Olaf Beyer: surprised Coe and Ovett in Prague