Track and Field

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One Man the Kenyans Could Not Beat

When the Olympic Games were held in Mexico City in 1968, many felt that conditions were made to measure for athletes raised and trained in the same medium altitude conditions. This was especially so of endurance events where low pressure hampers recovery. It was not surprising that the 1,500 m, 10,000 m, marathon and steeplechase all went to runners from Kenya or Ethiopia, while the 5,000 m was won by a runner from Tunisia.

The exception was the 800 m where Australian Ralph Doubell faced the redoubtable Kenyan, Wilson Kiprugut. After beating the Kenyan in the semifinal Doubell took a tactical view in the final. Kiprugut, by temperament a front runner, ran the first 400 m in a savage 51.0 sec, quick enough to eclipse the world record if sustained for another lap. Doubell held back in fourth place, passing two rivals in the back straight and closing on Kiprugut on the final turn. The last 50 metres decided it, with Doubell fighting off the dead weight of oxygen debt more efficiently than Kiprugut, the man who had lived all his life in thin air.

More incredible than this result was the timing. Doubell was clocked at 1 min 44.3 sec, equal to the world record, which he must surely have smashed had he been running at sea level.

The man behind this improbable performance was the veteran coach, Franz Stampfl, who had previously advised such luminaries as Roger Bannister and Chris Chataway before he emigrated from England to Australia.

Doubell's career was cut short by an achilles tendon injury but not before he had raced a successful tour of the American indoor circuit, including a world record for 1,000 yards of 2 min 05.5 sec. He had won the World Student Games 800 m in 1967 before the Mexico City summit.

RALPH DOUBELL

Born Feb. 11, 1945, in Melbourne, Australia

AWARDS AND RECORDS

1968 OG: gold medal in 800 m in 1 min 44.3 sec, Mexico City

World record: 800 m in 1 min 44.3 sec, Mexico City, 1968

Doubell wins an 800 m heat in the Commonwealth Games of 1970