

## Rod Dixon

A 17-year career as a New Zealand representative and for four years in the early 1980s he was the No 1 runner on the competitive American road-racing circuit. He was for two decades one of the world's great athletes. He was flamboyant, quotable and exciting. Sometimes he riled athletics followers because of his bold attitude and his penchant for self promotion, but there can be no doubting that, along with fellow kiwis John Walker and Dick Quax, he kept New Zealand athletes on the world map in the 1970s and 80's. The three flying Kiwis would pack their bags in May and head for Europe where they adopted a have-shoes-will-run attitude.

Rod Dixon grew up in Nelson, where he was coached by his older brother John, who was a New Zealand Champion athlete himself. "I was inspired by Peter Snell, Murray Halberg, and the other runners of that era, and I remember standing for hours outside their hotel in Nelson waiting to get their autograph. Dixon recalled, however my brother John was my hero, someone who I admired and was prepared to train very hard to please.

He received his big chance in 1972 when, after John Dixon had paced the race perfectly, he chased Tony Polhill down the final straight in the 1972 national 1500m final. A few weeks later with John pacing again in the Olympic trials, Rod won the race and went under the Olympic qualifying time and earned selection for the Munich Olympics. At the Games, he improved with every outing, eventually claiming a bronze medal behind Pekka Vasala of Finland and Kip Keino of Kenya. On the dais, the young Dixon cried tears of joy.

In 1974 at the Christchurch Commonwealth Games, he ran the fifth fastest 1500m of all time, 3 minutes 33.89 seconds. Yet he finished out of the medals as Filbert Bayi and John Walker in front both went under Jim Ryun's previous world mark. In 1976 at the Montreal Olympics, he took part in one of the greatest races in games history, but finished fourth in the 5000m, deprived of a medal by the unmatched Lasse Viren, his fellow New Zealander Dick Quax and the desperate last-meter dive of German Klaus-Peter Hildenbrand.

Turning more to distance running, Rod won the Philadelphia Distance Classic in 1980 and 1981, taking the course record for the event. In 1982 and 1983, Rod won the prestigious Examiner Bay to Breakers Road Race in San Francisco, beating around 75000 runners in the process. The win in 1983 was another course record. He went into the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic marathon as one of the favorites after his brilliant run the previous year at the New York City Marathon, and ran creditably, to finish 10th. Dixon beat all the greats - Ben Jipcho, Steve Prefontaine, John Walker, Brendan Foster, Dick Quax, Emil Puttemans, Lasse Viren Henry Rono and many other world ranked runners. He was among the world's best. He was probably at his most dominant over cross country, where his strength on the hills made him someone to be feared. "He was the best cross country runner I ever saw," John Walker said. "He'd lose me on the hills whenever he wanted. He was so strong.

For the next 15 years he was seldom far from the news. There was a series of squabbles with his national association, which seemed hell-bent on suspending him for professionalism; there was some great running, some brash and rash predictions, and his garish-colored outfits. But always there was his running. During Walker's great year in 1975, Dixon was the only athlete to beat him in the world.

Rod Dixon won the national 1500m titles of New Zealand, France, the United States and twice the British championships. But he realized he did not have the speed to match Walker over the mile and converted himself easily into the world's best 5000m runner.

There were some heartbreaking episodes. In 1978 he was in superlative form but was denied the chance to challenge Henry Rono for the Edmonton Commonwealth Games 5000m gold medal when someone stole his Special running shoes and sports bag before the race. In 1980 he missed out on the Moscow Olympics because of the American boycott.

Dixon was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of his sport. But the man, who before he had even ventured overseas had said "running is my business and my business is my running", quickly proved adept at the business of earning a living from running. He grasped the trust fund concept early and with the assistance of good legal representation was able to keep prize money from races on the United States road racing circuit while others still anguished about whether they could accept prize money. He based himself in the United States while other New Zealanders were still journeying back and forward across the world. For three years he was race director of Auckland's Round the Bays run which boasts some 80,000 runners, and was appointed as one of the assistant coaches for the Fijian Olympic team at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

As he looks back on a life of running, Rod Dixon nominates two moments as being outstanding - the Olympic bronze and the New York City marathon victory. But it is obvious he is just as proud of the role he played in the 1970s when he was one of the leaders as world athletics charged from the stone-age amateur days into the modern professional era. Even after all these years he has never lost his passion for running. He looks more like a man in his mid-20s than someone in their 50's. He runs and enjoys training for such sports as mountain biking and kayaking. No one has ever defied the ageing process better.

"As you get older, your body is your life. If your body stays in good shape, you can lead a much fuller and more energetic life."