

# TOSHIHIKO SEKO

## Japan

BY DAN SCHLESINGER

"Be constantly alert and look for that instant when the enemy's guard is down, then strike with precision," instructs a Japanese classic on samurai warfare written in 1522. "Hide your *honno* (real intentions)," the text continues. "And observe the essential distinction between *honno* and *tatemaie* (what one reveals)."

Toshihiko Seko studies the text. He's been trained to think and act like a samurai. "It's fine for runners of other countries to come right out and say what they think," Seko says in a quiet, confiding tone. "But we Japanese won't say exactly what is on our mind."

There is no doubt, of course, that Seko's mind is on Los Angeles. As early as 1981 when he disappeared briefly from the international racing scene, Seko and his coach, Kiyoshi Nakamura, had set the '84 Olympics as their goal. "We're gearing up for L.A.," Nakamura told the press. "Toward that end, I plan to have Seko rest for one whole year."

Now, with the Games only months away, rest is a thing of the past. In March on the South Island of New Zealand, Seko began what was said to be "hard training." One wonders what hard training could mean to the 5'6", 140-pound Seko. A trainer recalls the time that Seko ran continuously for six hours on the South Island, spurred by news that the Soh brothers, Shigeru and Takeshi, had been training long and hard on the North Island.

The Soh's (see page 68) are pleased to be the two other Japanese Olympic marathoners and don't try to match the feats of Seko. One can't compete with a legend. Shigeru figures his own monthly mileage hovers around 1,000 kilometers, or roughly 150 miles a week. "Yet as far as I know, Seko averages 1,500 kilometers."

### Seko's Marathon Record

Kyoto (2/13/77)	2:26:00 (10th)
Fukuoka (12/4/77)	2:15:01 (5th)
Milton Keynes (7/8/78)	2:53:17 (69th)
Fukuoka (12/3/78)	2:10:21 (1st)
Boston (4/16/79)	2:10:12 (2nd)
Fukuoka (12/2/79)	2:10:35 (1st)
Fukuoka (12/7/80)	2:09:45 (1st)
Boston (4/20/81)	2:09:26 (1st)
Tokyo (2/13/83)	2:08:38 (1st)
Fukuoka (12/4/83)	2:08:52 (1st)

"Hard training," then, must be a step up from that. Seko's stoic absorption in a single physical activity has at times been self-destructive. Injuries have cropped up repeatedly over the course of his long career, and his 1981 "rest," brought on by a bad knee, lasted for nearly a year. After recovering with the help of acupuncture, he won the 1983 Tokyo Marathon convincingly, then left for New Zealand intent on "hard training." But soon after returning he came down with hepatitis, reportedly aggravated by drinking too much beer after long training sessions. Doctors ordered Seko to stop running.

So he started walking. Seko said 30 km a day. Coach Nakamura said 40. In any case, outsiders said he could be seen walking everywhere with feverish intensity, his face and neck swollen by either the effect of hepatitis or medication. Some speculated Seko might not recover in time for the Olympics.

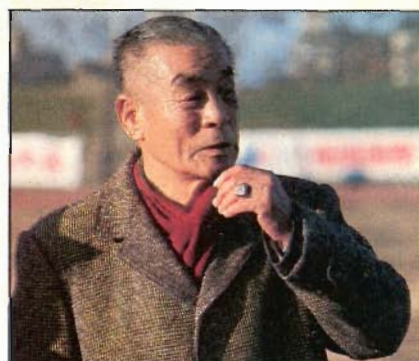
Just as a century ago the samurai put down their swords and disappeared as a class, so it seemed that Seko had been forced to bow out of a changing world—a modern world in which athletes practice more advanced training methods than ultra-mileage and approach competition less gravely than samurai poised on the brink of death.

But Seko sprang back. By August he was training again, and by September he had broken his own Japanese 20-km record. That set the stage for Fukuoka, a breathtaking race in which Seko sprinted away from Juma Ikangaa, the Soh's and Alberto Salazar. As soon as the marathon was over, Seko ran to the side of his coach and bowed deeply. Then without delay the two returned to Tokyo together.

Seko, 27, lives with coach Nakamura who supervises his life like an overprotective parent—from the moment Seko steps out to do his morning run until late into the night when the old coach lectures on Buddhist scriptures, the Bible and the classic works on samurai warfare. But Nakamura, 70, is more than a parent to Seko.

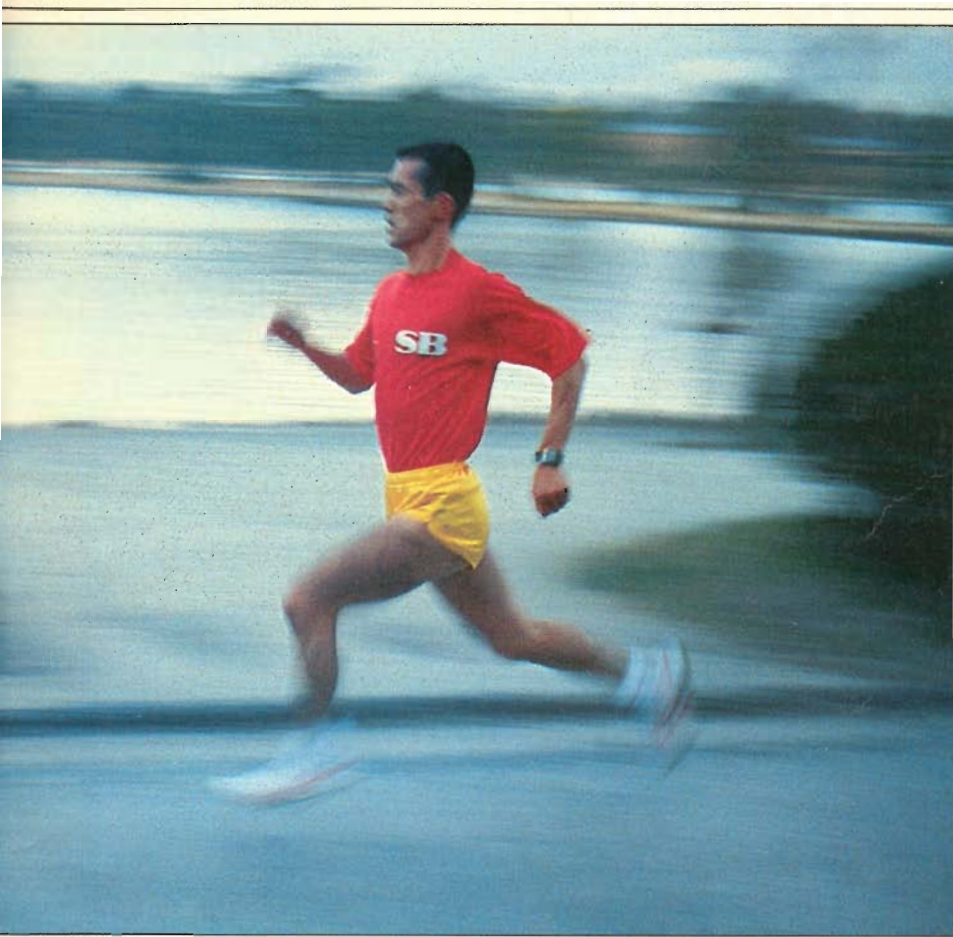
"My strength comes from my coach," says Seko. "He is always with me. Just as Salazar runs with God, I run with coach Nakamura."

Nearly every afternoon Seko can be seen running around a 1,300-meter asphalt path near the Tokyo Olympic



**In Japan, marathon running is a very serious sport, and the highly disciplined and obedient Seko regards his coach, 70-year-old Kiyoshi Nakamura, above, as his master. At top: Most afternoons Seko trains around a 1,300-meter path near Tokyo's Olympic Stadium. Right: Seko has won the prized Fukuoka Marathon four times. Last December, in a rare show of emotion, he hams it up with the man he outkicked, Juma Ikangaa of Tanzania.**

Stadium. After 20 years the stadium remains a home for the heroes of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics: their pictures, though faded, still hang from stone pillars. Their names and achievements mark an unforgettable fragment of Japanese



spair, he committed ritual suicide.

The stadium casts a shadow on Seko as he runs around and around the asphalt path with tireless determination. He is said to have once circled the path 70 consecutive times, a distance of almost 57 miles. Others train around the same circuit, though separately. They are Seko's colleagues at the curry powder company ("S & B"), which sponsors some of Japan's finest running talent, and students at Waseda University, Seko's alma mater.

Nakamura peers at the runners from inside the running course, stopwatch in hand, unswerving and vigilant. Soon a young man from a competing college saunters up to the asphalt circuit and starts to time one of his athletes. Nakamura demands to know what brings them to the area. "You misunderstand my motive," the much younger coach contends. "My office is nearby. We came here as a matter of convenience." But Nakamura is enraged by this breach of tradition. He is lord of this little plot of land, and the two strangers are strongly discouraged from ever coming back.

Seko himself is not much freer with his training space. He shuns the companionship of anyone outside the curry company. Without being too specific, he summarizes his training. "Long slow distance is the core of my daily routine. I run intervals occasionally, 5,000 meters x 2, for example, at faster than race pace." As a warm-up several days before the Fukuoka Marathon in December, Seko was rumored to have been timed over 20 kilometers twice in a single day at a pace faster than 58 minutes each.

The stories are intriguing. A visiting journalist introduces himself to Nakamura. "Why are you in Tokyo?" Nakamura asks before consenting to an interview. "Whom are you writing for?" Nakamura has to ascertain this because he has many critics.

Nakamura responds to criticism by observing that no other Japanese coach has developed a talent approaching Seko's. Only two Japanese have ever beaten Seko. One outran him in the national collegiate championships 10,000, after Seko had won the 1,500 and 5,000 at the same meet. Another, the former Japanese record holder at 5,000, outkicked Seko in the last lap of a 10,000 the day



history. In the Olympic Marathon that year a Japanese named Kokichi Tsuburaya entered the Olympic Stadium in second place. He eventually finished third and bets were that he would win the gold at Mexico City to the glory

of Japan. But Tsuburaya was bothered by a weak Achilles tendon and the terrible pressures imposed by one hundred million Japanese starving for further international recognition. He never made it to Mexico City. Instead, in de-

after Seko broke the national 20-km record. The former is coached by Nakamura. The latter athlete saw his national 5,000 record broken later by another Nakamura runner.

One symbol of Nakamura's charisma is middle-distance ace Wilson Waigwa's younger cousin, who came from Kenya to train under Nakamura. He is enchanted by the prospect of becoming a great runner like his cousin or, better yet, like Seko, and he thinks Nakamura can make him one.

After the '83 Fukuoka Marathon, a curious headline ran in one of the many Japanese sports newspapers. Without mentioning Seko's sensational victory in the race, the paper sounded the alarm: "In his present condition Seko cannot win the marathon at Los Angeles." In their hearts, however, the Japanese expect nothing less.

Those expectations have a rational basis: Seko's extraordinary record in international competition. Of his five straight marathon wins going back to

1979, three came at Fukuoka, one at Tokyo (where he ran his 2:08:38 PR), and another at Boston. He broke 2:09 in both of his marathons in 1983. His average winning time for the last four is 2:09:11. The last marathoner who beat him was Bill Rodgers at Boston in '79.

But such rational expectations have swelled to extremes for emotional reasons. A scarcity of Japanese runners at the international level has given Japan a sense of having something to prove. A loss by Seko might suggest to his nation that no amount of effort (Seko's representing the maximum), can overcome the natural disadvantages of being Japanese: shorter on the whole than their Western counterparts and squeezed onto a small, overcrowded island, with no place to train.

At Fukuoka, Seko raced Salazar and the others, and he won. Yet somehow the fact did not sink in. Nakamura wanted to know why Salazar "couldn't run" at Fukuoka. The story went that Salazar wasn't about to overtax him-

self unless his world record was threatened. When the pace slowed down as if by his design, Salazar settled back, satisfied to achieve his goal, which must have been merely to qualify for the U.S. Olympic trials. This, of course, was not true.

Seko has yet to race Robert de Castella—that is, since Deek's emergence as the world's number-one ranked marathoner. They have raced once, in Fukuoka in 1980. Seko won; de Castella was eighth. That's the last time de Castella lost a marathon.

During the Helsinki World Championships, Seko, sitting in front of the television watching the marathon with his coach, was asked to comment on the great Australian. Could Seko have won? Seko replied in words resonating with the teachings of ancient samurai, Buddhist monks and Kiyoshi Nakamura: "I couldn't say I would win. That would only facilitate my defeat."

Coach Nakamura was more direct. "De Castella reminds me of an animal, raised on steak, butter and cheese," he said, and his statement came across as derisive and suspicious. Coach Nakamura has not dealt very much with Westerners since World War II and he was dead wrong in his characterization. De Castella adheres to a low-fat, low-protein diet and probably eats less steak than Seko. Nakamura's second statement had to be taken more seriously: "De Castella has a weakness." Ears opened wide. What could it be? The answer was, one would expect, inscrutable, and intentionally so.

"De Castella's weakness is his explosiveness. Now I don't expect you to understand. This is Buddhist philosophy. There's a bomb ticking away inside of de Castella." (The same has been said of Seko.) "But a bomb can be put to constructive or self-destructive use. Just as wealth may bring about a wealthy man's downfall. Or beauty destroy a beautiful woman."

Seko listened carefully and cautiously added, "I would rather not think about particular enemies . . . unless you consider the heat an enemy. It's the sort of situation where a dark horse could easily emerge. I wouldn't even like to say what place I'd finish."

The Japanese, who speak an ambiguous language, have never put much stock in words. They prefer to let their actions speak for themselves. Whatever Seko says, it may be just so much *tatema*. And, in accordance with ancient Japanese tradition, he will probably go on underestimating his chances, leaving others to speculate on the real extent of his potential and what it will take to defeat him.

So far there has not been much evidence that it can be done. **FINISH**

## The Soh Brothers



**The Sohs, identical twins whose PRs average 2:09 flat, do not aspire to match Seko, and take a less dogmatic approach to running.**

The Soh brothers, Takeshi and Shigeru, are in a unique position to observe Seko. They are world-class marathon runners who have spent their lives training and racing in Seko's shadow. In spite of sporting personal bests of 2:08:55 and 2:09:06, respectively, and having raced Seko a total of ten times, neither has ever come out on top.

The Sohs, however, do not aspire to Seko's heights. Their dream, instead, has been to compete together at the Olympic Games, the first identical twins in history to do so.

In 1976 only Shigeru qualified for Montreal. In 1980 both Sohs made the Japanese team, but Japan joined the Olympic boycott. Then at this

year's Japanese Olympic trial (the Fukuoka Marathon), both Sohs qualified for the Games by placing second and third within a strong Japanese field.

Although the Sohs sometimes finish minutes apart in a marathon, each twin speaks of the sympathetic presence of the other as a factor positively affecting his ability to race. Shigeru ran poorly while running alone in the 1976 Games. Teaming up this year, he and Takeshi, who train in southern Japan where the sultry climate is similar to L.A.'s, could very well make their presence felt.

Who's the Japanese with the best chance to win the Olympic marathon? Some would say Soh.