

Wheeler's record removes doubt

By PAUL McGRATH
Battalion Sports Editor

Those clouds of doubt are no longer hovering over the head of Tony Wheeler. In only the second week after recovering from a strained achilles tendon, the 23-year-old freshman from South Africa set a school record in the 880-yard run.

Until recently, there was some doubt as to whether Wheeler would run at all, much less have a shot at any records. He got a cramp in his right leg during cross country season, something which seemed only a temporary ailment at the time. However, the pain continued and soon developed into a strain, the first injury Wheeler had ever suffered while running track.

Wheeler missed part of the indoor season while slowly rounding back into form. He became competitive for the first time in the rain and cold of Laredo's Border Olympics, placing second with a 1:54.4.

He proved himself not only a competitor but also a winner with his record-breaking 1:48.7 half-mile in the finals of the College Station Relays. His time eclipsed the previous meet record and the A&M record by Willie Blackmon of 1:49.0 in 1971. Wheeler's clocking was also .1 of a second under the winning time in the 880 at last year's Southwest Con-

ference meet. The moustachioed Wheeler defeated four of the conference's top five half-milers in setting the new mark.

The gains he has made in the past few weeks has been a boost to his morale, Wheeler said. "We (speaking of himself) started off with no confidence. I was beginning to get a little worried I couldn't make it here."

"But the change has come so quickly that I must be careful of overconfidence," Wheeler added.

The Texas A&M freshman has best times of 1:48.4 in the 880 and 1:47.4 in 800-meters. Wheeler has run against some of Europe's and Africa's top half-milers, including world record holder Marcello Fiasconaro. Much of his competition abroad ran in the 1:44 and 1:45 range.

He says the competition is "good" in the States. "The biggest difference from South Africa is that over there we have only a few guys at the top, the ones that run the 1:44's and 1:45's. Over here, there are a lot of people who run under 1:50. There's no reason why anyone shouldn't improve over here," he said.

Wheeler was recruited by A&M assistant track coach Ted Nelson following information received from two other South African runners at A&M, Manfred Kohrs and Bruce Smith.

Although unable to get under 2:30

as a high school freshman, Wheeler ran a 1:49.9 his senior year. He started work with a South African business firm after a year's stint in the air force. Officials at the firm decided Wheeler ought to return to school in order to advance himself in the company later on. That's when he received a phone call from Nelson. Wheeler accepted a scholarship at A&M after turning down previous offers from Oregon, Michigan and Oklahoma.

Wheeler tries to capture the lead early in a race so "that they (the competition) have to worry about me all of the time. That way I don't have to worry about getting boxed in. I try to dictate the race until I get challenged."

That is the method he used in his record-setting race at the Relays. Wheeler led the entire race while holding off Baylor's Phil McClellan, beating him by nearly 10 yards.

"I had made up my mind to do well, but I was still surprised that I did it," he said. "I would have been happy with a 1:49."

★★★

Coach Charles Thomas will send a token team to Beaumont today to compete with Lamar and Houston Baptist. Saturday the Aggies will compete in the Dallas Invitational.



Tony Wheeler
A&M record holder in 880-yard run.

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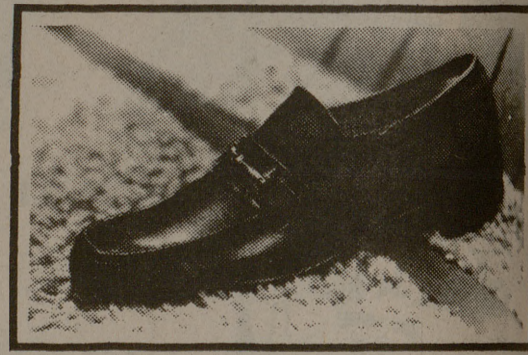
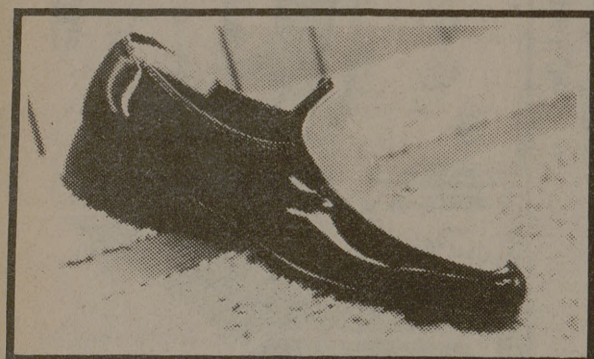
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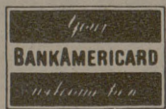
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