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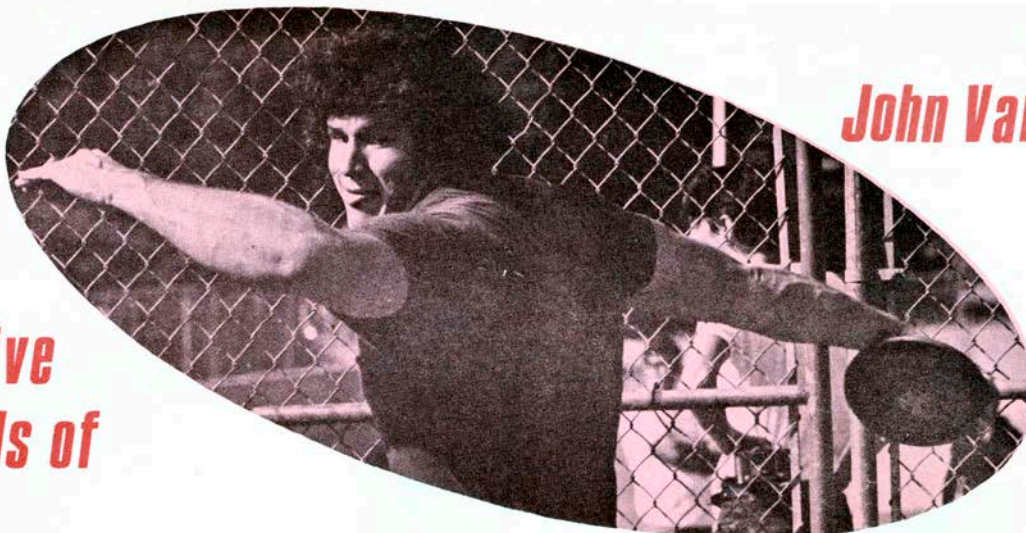


**World
Leading
Non-Olympian**

**John
Van Reenen**

John Van Reenen

The Creative Hands of



/Chip Gane/

by Garry Hill

Now here are two interesting hands.

You shake the first (or rather, it shakes you). "Good grief," you mutter as the massive appendage swallows your own in its palm. "Unngh," you say, as your scrawny fingers are pressured by the other's thick, steely digits.

Now you place a pen, or pencil, or crayon, or brush, or something in that genre between the thumb and forefinger of the second. Moving authoritatively, the hand flows across the page, leaving a carefully collated trail of markings which depict anything you order.

The first hand, the one which could wield the hammer of Thor, belongs to one of the world's premier discus throwers. The second, although not belonging to one of the great masters, is attached to an accomplished artist. Both hands are the right hand of discus thrower/artist John Van Reenen.

Although the thought of a 6-7½, 285-lb. "jock" having sensitivity and creativity might seem incongruous, Van Reenen quickly dispels that notion. The first hint comes when you shake the first hand, and feel the warmth of the firm, yet tender grip. And seeing the fruits of his artistic labors can be a great convincer. And we don't just mean the caricatures that have appeared in these pages before (such as his self-portrait on the cover). Those themselves are not all that easy, but rest assured that John can turn out "serious" art.

But the 25-year-old John has all the rest of his life to be an artist. Right now he wants to be the best discus thrower in the world. And he is on his way, leading the globe with his PR 215-10 toss and defeating all comers.

"I haven't been drawing as much lately," he reveals. "I've really been hitting the workouts, and my mind is centered on track. I'll probably end up being a full-time artist sometime. I really enjoy it. But I have the job situation I do now because that's the easiest way to still be able to pursue throwing the discus. When I am through with track I can pursue my other direction. That's what I'm planning for. It's impossible to do both right now, too time-consuming to do it all at once. I'll probably keep throwing until I'm in my 30s, until I feel I'm getting too old. I certainly don't think I've reached my peak yet. But I can't put off looking for a solid job in the art field until then."

So John pursues his newly-found vocation, that of the best discus-throwing bouncer in the world. "Not everyone can be a bouncer," he smiles. Just coincidentally, it seems that both of the South African's roommates, 254-1 javelin thrower John Kaveny and 206-0 discus thrower Miles Lister, share his vocation. They certainly picked colorful-sounding establishments to work in. Van Reenen and Kaveny are both employed at Papa Joe's Rock Emporium and Screen Door Factory in Redondo Beach, while Lister is at The Ore House (and you thought all the nasty places in California were in San Francisco) in Santa Monica. And working until the wee hours of the morning four nights a week isn't exactly the easiest way to stay in training. "At least I never get hassled by anyone," reports John. "The guy would have to be out of his mind (one look at his door-filling frame and you know what he means). However, Miles does sometimes get bothered by Skid Row drunks, so he just picks them up and throws them across the street. He's pretty strong."

The massive trio recently moved into new quarters, a site with a bedroom for each of them. Prior to that, the three had shared a place with only one bedroom. "It got a little tense sometimes," he reveals, "especially since we don't always share the same politics. Miles is more the conservative type, while John and I might be termed radicals." I thought radicals didn't work? "Hell," he says, "If I don't work, I'll starve. I'm working as a matter of survival." Income has been supplemented by formation of the John-John

Shirt Co., in which Kaveny and Van Reenen manufacture tee-shirts with slogans and drawings made to order. Needless to say, you can't buy any of their products at Macy's or Sears.

But even though his life is complicated by all these extra-curricular activities, Van Reenen is managing to do the best discus throwing of his life. After an opening meet loss to Lister which John dismisses as "practice", he has gone undefeated, beaten world record holder Jay Silvester by over five-feet, and topped 200-feet in 10 of 12 outings. His PR 215-10 toss moves him to ninth on the all-time world list. "And I haven't even had a good wind yet this year," he says. "My 207-6 against Jay was completely windless, and on the 215-10 one the disc didn't even turn over, so there was practically no wind. There was a light breeze, but it wasn't blowing from the best direction. Actually, I was really surprised about that weekend (when he hit 206-11 at UCLA and 215-10 at Long Beach). I had to work both nights before and didn't get to bed until after 2:30."

Discus throwing has grown somewhat tainted in the past few seasons with the rise of "wind-aided" throws. The only really constant which may be applied in ranking platter men is their competitive record. The big marks must now be taken into account with the wind of the day.

Not that John doesn't like the wind. In April of 1970, he had a great aiding wind carry his plate to a then-world record 225-0, but fouled narrowly. "That throw really upset me, but it showed me that it was there. That was the reason I stayed on in America. I could have gone home after I graduated, but I knew I would have wasted something if I didn't stay. I'd sort of like to prove that I can do it—here I am.

"Now I can throw well in a wind too. You have to know how to throw into the wind. Some guys don't throw much better with the wind than they do without. I can use the wind. But I also like to consider myself as one of the better throwers without a wind. A short time ago I hit 221 in practice with just a slight breeze."

A three-time NCAA champ (68-69-70), Van Reenen ranked seventh in the world in 69 and climbed to sixth in 70, getting a PR 208-10. But in 1971, out of collegiate eligibility, but not through school, he slumped to 202-10, in one of few competitions and was generally out of it.

Why is 1972 turning out to be such a big season? Appearing even more massive than ever, he was asked, aren't you bigger than you used to be? "Nah," he cracks, "I've finally reached puberty."

When he arrived on the Washington State University campus in January 1967, his "pre-pubescent" 6-7, 270-lb. frame qualified him instantaneously as the "big man on campus". The stories generated by his body (in varying stages of credibility) are legion.

For example, there's the one about the anatomy professor. John had not been on campus too long when the guy looks at him like a cat eyeing a bird and says, "John, when you die can we have your body for our laboratory?" And there is his first experience in the weight room. John had never lifted weights before. A group was doing clean-and-jerk movements with about 250-lbs. "Try it," some suggested. Easily shouldering the weight, the neophyte lifter, in a movement approximating a military press more than anything else, raised the weight over his head several times as eyes bulged around the room. Crashing the weight to the floor, John announced, "I don't think I like those." And for four years, his lifting was sparse.

"I still haven't been lifting that much," he relates, "but I am a lot stronger. I've just been doing stuff that will help me in throwing the discus, like stretches and pulls. I do a lot of heavy flys and agility exercises. If I were throwing the shot I would do heavy benches and squats. But I don't really have any real interest in throwing the shot at present. I might again later on, but first I want to get the record in the discus. If I do that, I'll switch to the shot. I am sure that I can throw well in the shot. Two years ago, without

good technique and not very strong, I hit 65-0 (tying with current world indoor record holder Al Feuerbach for 10th on the 1970 world list)."

The real secret to John's 1972 successes comes in the actual throwing of the disc. "I'm doing a lot on my technique. I think that has helped me. And I'm throwing a lot more than I ever did before, in practice and in meets. I get much better practice throws than I used to. And of course, there is Dick Tomlinson (see accompanying box).

"It's really great being in southern California. If I had been here four years ago, it would be a different story. I didn't have enough exposure in Washington, throwing on my own with nothing to psych me. I didn't learn as much as I could have while I was there, but it was partly my fault. I should have come down here in the summer and thrown with all these guys. Now I can throw almost whenever I want. I can throw twice every weekend and I even have a little practice meet on Wednesdays."

Not that John regrets his stay in Washington. "It was a tremendous experience," he says. "I'd give anything to have it all over again. I'm just happy in that I have made a success of it all, where a lot of guys wouldn't have and a lot of guys didn't. I even got a degree."

He also became probably the first South African ever to play American-style football. Also the biggest fullback ever, even though he didn't get to play much. "Football was all right. I think I could have hacked it, but I played in the wrong position, even though that was my idea. I was too inexperienced. If I could have picked a position where I could have adapted better, I might have been able to make it. I really don't think I played long enough to find out." John is slightly modest here. The first time he ever carried the ball, against UCLA, he charged for 13-yards, even though most of it was with his back to the line. And he even picked up a touchdown, fumbling the ball in the end zone and sitting on it.

It is a long way from Bethlehem, South Africa to an end zone in Washington. After graduation from high school, John spent a mandatory year in the air force. He recalls, "The dean of the School of Social Sciences at Washington State saw me throw in a meet. He was a good friend of Jack [Mooberry] and offered me a scholarship and I took it.

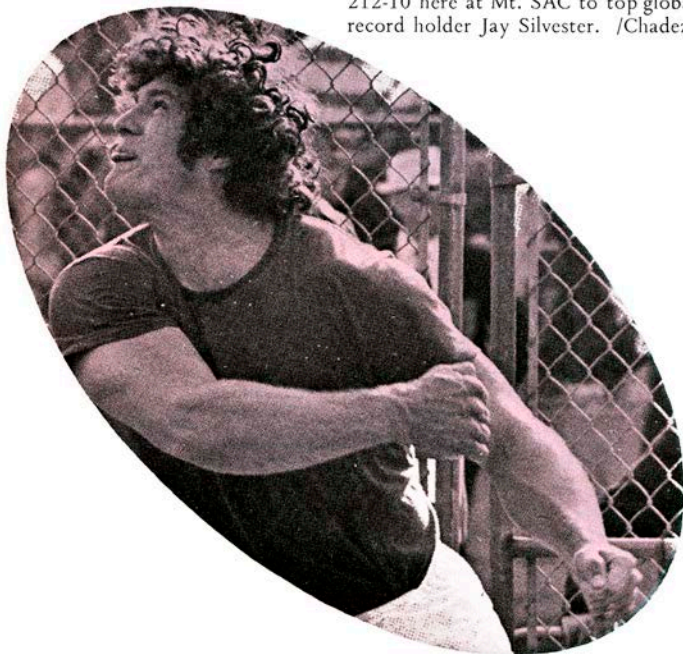
"I knew it would be winter when I got to Pullman, but it was still all surprising. I really suffered from culture shock, and was homesick for the first six months. I'd never been out of the country before, and I didn't know anybody. But I got over it.

"The really strange part came last November when I went back home [for the interracial meet] for the first time in almost five years. I felt reverse culture shock. I had to be careful of what I said and get used to what were now strange customs and language."

And being a South African has worked the greatest hardship of all on John. Even if he throws the disc 300-feet this year, he cannot go to Munich. Because of the country's official policy of apartheid, the nation has been banned from competition. "The Olympics are just as important to me as to any other person," says John. "I want to compete. It's a meet for all the best, and I consider myself one of the best. But if I'm not allowed to, I'll have to make the best of it and prove I'm one of the best. If I can win everything, it will be great, because then the best guy won't be there.

"This is discrimination against us, the fact that the IOC won't let us in. It goes two ways. Them leaving us out doesn't make them any better than

John Van Reenen whipped the disc 212-10 here at Mt. SAC to top global record holder Jay Silvester. /Chadez/



An example of John Van Reenen's artistic handiwork: Mohinder Gill.

what they are accusing us of. Unfortunately, in South Africa the sports people care and would change things, but the politicians don't. But track is an individual thing. It's my thing I'm doing and it's my decision. If I don't blow my horn, nobody else will." □

Dick Tomlinson: 'A Real Good Dude'

"Because of Dick Tomlinson," says John Van Reenen, "my technique is much better than ever before. I train with him as much as I can—almost every day." And this year's results so far have showed the benefits of improved technique.

John relates his meeting with Tomlinson: "I came down from Washington to throw at Modesto last year. I was introduced to Dick, and we started to talk. We ended up at his motel room, where he had films of all the throwers, including me. He told me what he thought I should do and it really helped."

After his graduation, Van Reenen moved into the southern California area to further his training. And now, the months of work are coming to fruition. "My throwing is coming on," says John. "I would say it is good."

John isn't the only one benefiting from Tomlinson's tutoring. As related in the 11 April issue, Steve Smith, currently America's hottest man on a pole, gave much credit to Tomlinson, a coach at El Camino Junior College.

A 240-3 javelin thrower for Southern Cal in 1960, Tomlinson did his first notable coaching job at the 1962 NCAA. The following is a quote from the June 1962 *T&FN* by Jan Sikorsky, the NCAA javelin champ of that year. "Dick Tomlinson came out of the stands before my last throw and told me to keep my shoulder up and my throw low—that's what I did, and it worked." Sikorsky won on that throw.

At 36, Tomlinson, with a primary concern on jumps and throws, appears to be a quickly-rising coaching talent. Not only do Van Reenen, roommates Miles Lister and John Kaveny and Smith avail themselves of his talents, but so also do vaulters Bob Richards (with a recent PR of 16-9) and Tim Quinn (who leads the yearly prep list at 15-8½). As well, when indoor shot record holder Al Feuerbach is in town, he sometimes drops by for consultation. And Tomlinson used to have technique discussions with world discus record holder Jay Silvester.

Van Reenen explains his mentor's strongest asset: "Not only does he really know his stuff, but as an individual he's just a hell of a guy, a real good dude." □