

# AL FEUERBACH

One would assume that T&FN would have no trouble trying to interview shot king Al Feuerbach. Not so.

Even though he lives just down the road a few miles from our offices, it was not easy for us to get him sat down long enough to enjoy any meaningful discourse.

If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Like spending time at home in Preston, Iowa before the Drake Relays. Like him being busy every day trying to keep his new business venture (he's importing Finnish track shoes—Karhu). Like running "Al Feuerbach's home for wayward track people." (Aside from having putter Pete Shmock as a roommate, the congenial Al has a steady stream of people wandering through, staying the odd night—Mac Wilkins, Sam Walker, Glenn Derwin, Mark Lutz...)

But once one gets Mr. Feuerbach settled with a microphone in his face, the "perfect" interview begins. Immediately he changes from the easygoing rake-about-town to the erudite student of his event. He thinks carefully before answering, formulating logically-ordered sentences which always seem to answer the question with just the nuance wanted.

And he is unabashedly frank:

**T&FN:** You're now 27. In 1975 you'll probably make the US Team for the sixth year in a row, and all of a sudden you're the "grand old man" of US track. Here you are, a young member of society, yet in your peer group you are so advanced.

**Feuerbach:** I found it strange two years ago when they started calling me a "veteran." Only in America could you be called a veteran after making only three national teams, at 24 or 25. Basically it's because of our system, which is based on the high schools and colleges. That's where all our great track athletes are developed. It's not possible for every athlete who is good—or potentially good—to go on after college. Therefore, we have a greater turnover and they become veterans at a younger age.

The European system is one which strives for development of an athlete to reach his peak at 27 or 28. That's basically my philosophy and always has been.

**T&FN:** Is the main problem then a lack of competitive opportunities?

**Feuerbach:** It is for a lot. I think we lose a lot of potentially-great athletes because only the top athlete in America gets a chance to travel to meets other than local ones once he graduates. While he's in college he competes for the team and someone pays for it. The state pays for it,

or whatever.

After you graduate, you'd better be on one of the top clubs and you'd better be one of the top athletes or you're not going to get the chance to compete against the best.

That leads me right into one of my basic philosophies why some of our athletes excel tremendously: traveling to Europe has to be one of the greatest benefits for any American athlete. The chance to compete against the best athletes in the world under many different conditions, in many different places, is a tremendous learning experience.

For some reason, the AAU tries to hinder this and tries to block travel permits. They think for some reason that that will help the US system. I don't think so. I don't think anyone's that foolish. I think they want such tight control, but they're restricting the development of American track athletes.

**T&FN:** From your position, what do you see as the AAU's motivation here? Why do they refuse to see the "obvious" facts?

**Feuerbach:** I'm absolutely dumbfounded. I couldn't even guess their motives because they're so ignorant. They seem to be so opposed to what the true facts are. The athletes who go to Europe, who compete meet after meet—Jim Bolding, Dwight Stones, Francie Larriue, Ralph Mann, Steve Prefontaine—are American's greatest track athletes. I think the fact that they are in Europe competing time and time against Europe's best is in no small part a factor in their being No. 1 in their event.

**T&FN:** Most of the names you mention are members of the Pacific Coast Club. Is this a coincidence, or can you equally say that about most of the athletes who go to Europe?

**Feuerbach:** It's not coincidental. There are other factors. On the PCC we have inter-squad competitiveness throughout the year. It's not easy to be No. 1 on the PCC when you are competing against Dwight Stones, or Jim Bolding, and now against John Powell. This high level of competition pushes us even higher, to be No. 1 on a given day.

Where else are we going to go to further our talents, to further our chances for a gold medal? What are we going to do, sit around for a month and wait for the

meets the AAU has lined up against some rinky-dink country somewhere?

**T&FN:** How much of the incentive to compete in Europe is financial? In other words, we all hear stories about financial incentives, particularly in Scandinavia.

**Feuerbach:** It was proven long ago that you have to eat food to live, and beyond that it was proven that athletes who burn off a lot of energy have to eat even better food, and more of it. In our society, one must pay tokens to gain food to eat. They are called dollars and cents. In my opinion (can't speak for anyone else), it's not the major motivation.

But I could not in any way, shape, or form feel immoral about receiving any financial benefit from the sport. I put 13 years of work into it. I never went into it for money and I'm not in it for money now, but if someone wants to give me ample expense money I'm not going to tell them I don't want it.

**T&FN:** As part of your travels in Europe, you've seen other benefits they have, such as in sports medicine. This must make a big difference to the Europeans.

**Feuerbach:** I think it does if it isn't overdone. I think that the Western nations have good sports medicine, good doctors interested in sports. I don't know first-hand about the East European countries but I think maybe they overdo it.

They tend to be too scientific. They might get good results from their athletes, but they tend to stifle the athlete's mental attitude. That's my personal belief. Through placing so much emphasis on scientific types of facts and findings.

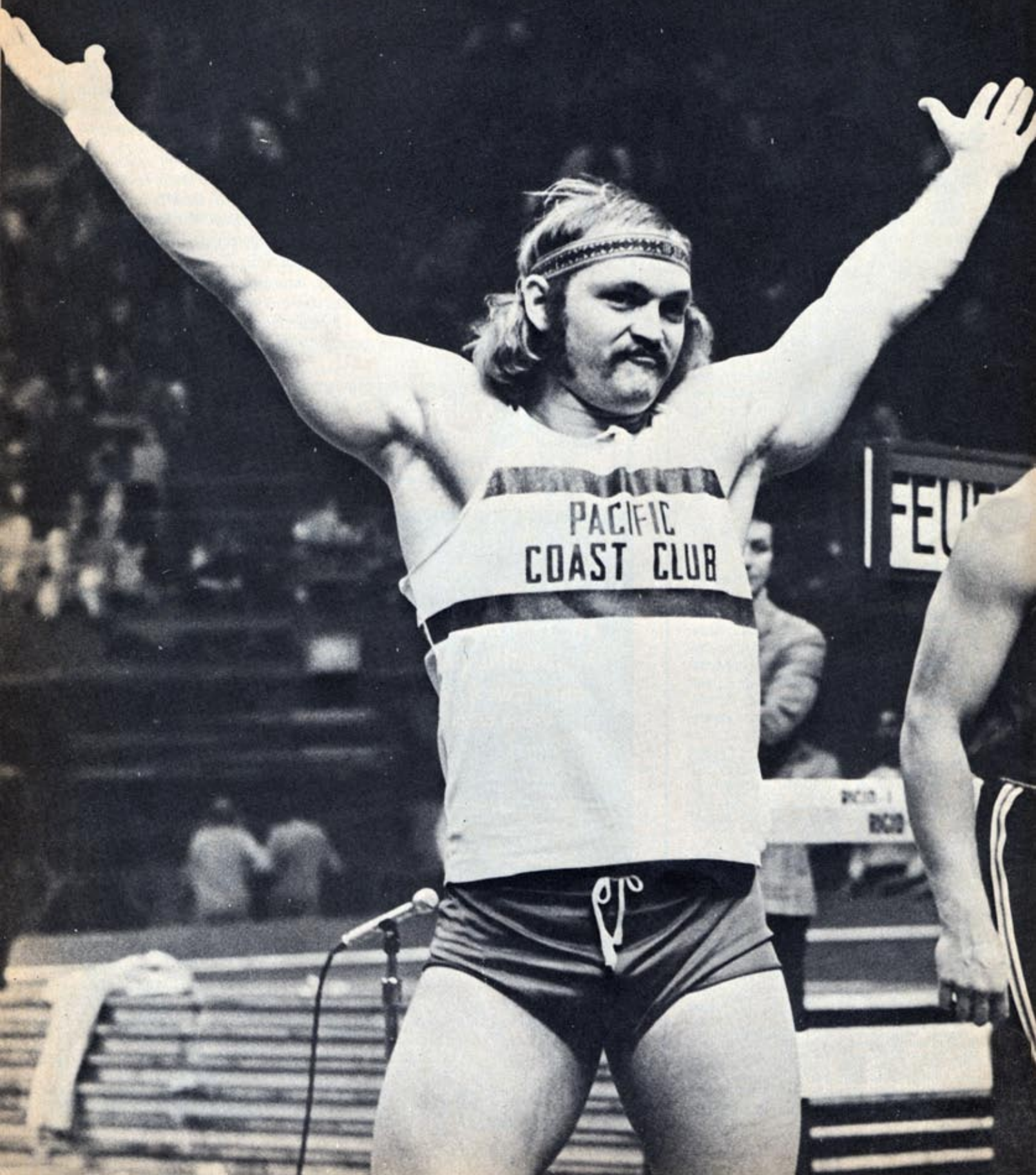
**T&FN:** Carrying sports medicine to the nth degree, one gets into the realms of things such as anabolic steroids. It would be my impression that most American weightmen who use steroids use them on a hit-and-miss basis.

**Feuerbach:** I'd like to interject here that when you talk about steroids that you shouldn't talk about weightmen only. I know as a fact that steroids are used by athletes in almost every single event in track and field as well as probably the majority of all our sports. As for being used on a hit or miss basis, that's basically true.

**T&FN:** In the Eastern bloc you would assume that this is a developed science? A part of sports medicine?

**Feuerbach:** I would assume so mainly because I have heard from Eastern European athletes about the studies that they do and about the way they administer steroids to their athletes and at which ages, and everything. But I don't care to go into a detail about which countries or which athletes, or which ages they start. But I got it from the horse's mouth.

It's really funny. I've been told by an athlete from a Western European nation who said he was talking with an Eastern bloc doctor who said that they administer certain dosages of steroids—like exceeding 100mg a day—and make the statement, "Well, Feuerbach—the world recordholder—uses this much, so you must



use this much." If I used that much steroid, not only would it be harmful to my body, but I would have been a paranoid schizophrenic years ago. It's totally untrue.

There's no way that an anabolic steroid will make an athlete a world champion. Totally impossible. There are too many other factors involved.

**T&FN:** *It seems that with current medical technology, there is no way they can effectively ban steroids, so what's the way out? Control by national doctors, and when they see that an athlete is being harmed by steroids they pull him off?*

**Feuerbach:** That seems to be the only realistic way, as bad as it sounds. I don't want to sound too pro-steroids. I would never, and have never, told anybody they should use them. There are very few things I can say I'll never do, but that's one.

To be very realistic, the people who write about steroids, the people who do studies, they aren't realistic. They are trying to find a certain conclusion, and they usually do.

I don't think they are as dangerous as they are supposed to be. I think if signs of damage show up, then one should quit. If you were taking too much aspirin, the doctor would prescribe something else.

**T&FN:** *Should there be age restrictions in using steroids?*

**Feuerbach:** I'd think it's foolish to take steroids at a young age. If anabolics are going to be used, I think that an athlete should develop to his full potential and technique (as close as possible), in speed, rhythm, timing; should work his strength as hard as possible. I don't see any way one can attain these before 22 or 23. In our system, this is beyond when the people who care want you to perform well. Another big problem with our system.

**T&FN:** *There has been a general under-current here where you've bad-mouthed the US system and talked about how it isn't conducive to competition after collegiate age, etc., but you do have an unblemished record of competing for the US when it comes to dual meets.*

**Feuerbach:** That's right. Perhaps the most motivating daydreams that I had when I was developing were thoughts of competing against the USSR, competing in the Olympic Games for the United States, and I think that after so many years of being motivated by competing for the US that it would be almost impossible to lose that as a reason for wanting to be a top athlete. I can't name one member of the PCC who doesn't want to compete for the US in international competition.

What seems to enter in is this threat, before politely asking, by the AAU. We want to compete against the Russians, but before we ever say that someone comes up and says, "We're gonna ban you for 10 days before, and we're going to keep you from doing this and that."

I don't think I'd be competing today if it weren't for Tom Jennings and the Pacific Coast Club. I think I would have

lost interest in track long ago if it were totally AAU-run. Since it's Jennings and PCC-run for me, I enjoy the sport immensely, to the point where I feel my enthusiasm will go far beyond 1976, whether or not I win a gold medal. I'll remain an amateur far beyond that.

**T&FN:** *I assume that the AAU's recent reaffirmation of the moratorium [see p. 60] isn't sitting too well with you and the PCC?*

**Feuerbach:** Well, if they could ever get something like that to stick, which I don't see how they can... I've trained personally for 13 years with no help from the AAU. I've realized a lifetime dream and become the world recordholder. I get opportunities to compete in Europe. I find that by competing often against the world's best in Europe I develop a higher level of competitive ability.

Then the AAU wants to block all this. I think if they are able to do this, which I feel is illegal, or immoral, I might immediately lose interest in track and I could foresee myself dropping out if they could control the sport the way they want to. I don't think it would be interesting in the least bit.

**T&FN:** *You said that even if you didn't win at Montreal you'd still want to compete in track. Strictly as an amateur, or with the pros?*

**Feuerbach:** First of all, I have a great deal of enthusiasm. I can't really see myself quitting track just because '76 is an Olympic year. I don't compete from Olympics to Olympics. I compete from year to year. I love track and field, but more than that I love to travel, to compete. The challenge of the new up-and-coming European putters is very stimulating. I don't find any less motivation than I did when I was 16 or 21. On that basis, I would say that I absolutely don't have any thoughts of retiring. As far as pro track is concerned, I hope it makes it. I wish it the best. Opposed to a lot of the purists, I don't think pro track is bad for the sport. I hope it's very successful. As for me, I'm not interested in competing against three or four guys each weekend in a different American city.

Now, there's always the money. The point could come. Everybody has a selling point. If I attain all the things I want in amateur track and the money is right, then I might consider it. I don't see it right after 1976. I do believe there will be a tremendous influx of Olympians into pro track after Montreal.

**T&FN:** *Frankly speaking, who is the No. 1 shot-putter in the world today?*

**Feuerbach:** Well, I believe that we have to go by official world records and by the Rankings done by *T&FN*. Not to be immodest, I have rated tops the last two years. I wouldn't argue with that decision. I only want to be No. 1.

What we are getting at here is, "Is Brian Oldfield the No. 1 putter in the world?" I think not. I was asked to compete in a pro meet against him, more or

less, as an amateur exhibition. I think they saw that as a kill. They knew he was in great shape. Perhaps they didn't know I was totally out of shape and that I was having trouble hitting 61 in practice. I had four days to prepare, but the mental stimulus of competing against Brian Oldfield brought me up to a level where I could beat him head-to-head by a foot and a half. It was the mental stimulus of competing against one I *could not* lose to.

Merely because I had been hearing so much about Oldfield. My ego won't allow me to lose to someone I know I'm better than. I heard about his 72-6½. I yawned when I read about it. I knew that two weeks earlier I had beaten him by a foot and seven inches. That's what's important to me. He throws against three individuals from week to week. For some reason that just doesn't impress me.

He's a great athlete. I know he can catch one now and then. I know that was his only throw over 70-feet. I know that he's never had a six-throw average as great as my own. I know that he has about half as many 70-foot throws as I have. I know that he has never beaten as many of the world's top competitors as I have, and I find it strange when people call him the world's greatest shot putter amidst all those facts—not just verbal statements from the guy who claims to be the greatest.

I think I said earlier that I was all for the pros, and hope they make it, and might even be interested. But something that has always perturbed me, because it has hit me directly, has been this PR stuff. It seems to be a bit overblown. I like things that are colorful. I enjoy reading about Oldfield's booze and his women. I find that very entertaining. But when the ITA publicity machine starts cranking out things like "I have 30 70-foot throws," things that are non-factual; merely to call him the greatest shot putter in history, or whatever, that bothers me, because I know better. I've been with the sport for 13 years and I find it very insulting and very ignorant.

**T&FN:** *Going back a few years, you and Oldfield are both from the "heartland of America," you from Preston, Iowa, he from Dundee, Illinois, just across the river sort of thing. You have a rivalry that goes back a lot more years than most people suspect.*

**Feuerbach:** That's true. We first started throwing against each other in 1967. At that time, he wasn't quite a 60-footer, I was a 195lb 56-footer. We competed in a series of summer meets.

Just to show you that Brian hasn't changed a bit, still verbose, etc., when he was still a so-so putter, he'd also throw the javelin, the 35lb weight. He'd hold the javelin over his head and yell, "Give me power." People two blocks away would cut their toes off mowing the lawn. He'd win all these events. I remember especially one meet where he had beaten me by a couple of feet in the shot, then beat me in the disc.

Before the javelin, he was sitting

under a tree, smoking a cigar, and he said, "Hey, Feuerbach, why don't you come over and throw the javelin so I can beat you in that too?" Things like that I haven't forgotten. I haven't forgotten while beating him something like 25 times in a row when we both became throwers at a higher level. I will admit though that he has beaten me once since we got to a high level. *Once.*

**T&FN:** *You gotta admit that he seems to have blossomed as a pro, that he's really in his element, particularly now that he has gone to the whirl.*

**Feuerbach:** I've always had this belief that Brian Oldfield can throw the same distance no matter how he throws. I've always thought he could do a back flip, spin around on one finger, then flip the shot over his shoulder and hit the same distance.

**T&FN:** *What is the new style worth?*

**Feuerbach:** I believe the discus style will be used by some, but I don't think it will revolutionize . . .

**T&FN:** *Revolution-ize, hey, that's a joke.*

**Feuerbach:** OK, rotationize. I believe it's got some serious drawbacks and it will be a matter of personal adaptation. In the discus style, it is perhaps possible to gain more continuous momentum, to a certain point. But because the shot is held next to the neck until the moment of release you have to use force to overcome the spin. You are splitting the line of power. That's the most serious drawback I can find. It'll be up to the individual to determine whether he can get enough extra momentum to compensate for the loss from spin.

**T&FN:** *You say you are sticking with the so-called O'Brien style. You know, "stuck" might characterize where you've been the last couple of years. It's two years since your world record and this is the same Al Feuerbach who has always said the only limitation is in the mind. Why is your progress stopped for the last two years?*

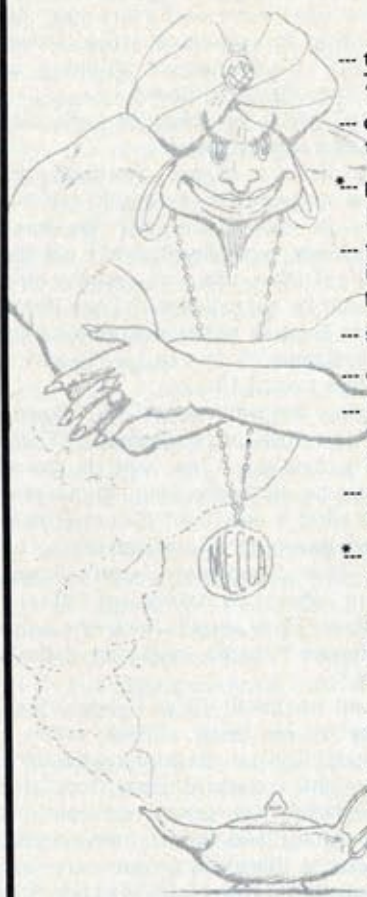
**Feuerbach:** That's an incorrect assumption. I haven't been stuck for two seasons. This season hasn't yet begun. My season begins in June. The limitations of the mind are obvious: there's no competition. Self-motivation, like a world record in the next few months, will be an achievement of major proportions and would indicate a throw of a much greater distance when there is motivation. I have no qualms about stating that I know I can throw 73, 74, maybe 75. I'm not a fool and I'm not an idiot and I won't say I can throw 80-feet, for promotion, like Oldfield does every single week. I know that I can throw 75, but it will depend on motivation. After the many hundreds of meets I've been in at an international level in the past few years I'm beginning to find it rather useless, as perhaps Matson did at one time, to throw far in each meet, just to win by more footage than the previous meet.

My future potential is still basically unlimited with the technique I now possess. □

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