

AL OERTER

by Ken Stone

It's as if Valeriy Brumel showed up at Berkeley this summer and dinked over 7-4. Or Peter Snell dusted off his adidas to cruise a 3:56.

The comeback of Alfred A. Oerter, born in the Olympic year of 1936, inspires such comparisons: the Rev. Bob vaulting 17-6. Bobby Morrow screaming down the straightaway today in 10.15.

But enough of romance. Oerter is back, throwing 200 feet, and you'd better believe he's serious about becoming the Olympic champion in the discus for the fifth time.

For those who've taken up the sport since 1969, when Oerter slipped into the obscurity of a West Islip, N.Y., home, a refresher is in order.

In 1956, Kansas sophomore Al Oerter, 20, upset much-favored teammate Fortune Gordien at Melbourne, 184-11 to 179-9. In 1960, he led an American sweep at Rome with a toss of 194-2. Four years later in Tokyo, again an underdog, he overcame the pain of ripped rib cartilage to beat Ludvik Danek in a new OR of 200-1. And in 1968, still feeling the effects of a slipped disc incurred in 1963, he punished his own record and Mexico City far-favorite Jay Silvester with his PR 212-6.

Said Oerter: "These are the Olympics. You die for them."

His reputation was that of a hulking strongman with little form but a monstrous competitive instinct. His friend/foe Silvester once said of him: "You see, he's the sort of guy who has never pushed himself. . . . He has never tapped what he has in the way of a reserve."

Criticized because of his rare appearances between Games, Oerter just lifted at home, sans coaching, raised a family and showed up for the Trials.

The 1959 KU graduate, now the head of the computer department at Grumman Aerospace Corp. on Long Island, might have continued living the quiet life of a legend had he not hooked up in 1975 with TV producer Bud Greenspan.

That year, he took part in the filming of "The Incredible Five" as part of The Olympiad television series. Over dinner in February, 1976, the conversation turned to competition. And a year later, he was throwing 200 feet.

Now 41 and competing around the country, Oerter spent some moments with T&FN before the UCLA-Pepsi Invitational to describe his plans. The next day, he threw 192-1 on his first—and best—throw of the afternoon, good for 7th behind Mac Wilkins' 227-11.

But so what. The Olympics are in 1980.

T&FN: You don't even look like 41.
Oerter: I don't feel like 41, either. I really feel that the 8 years between 1968 and when I started competing again have been like a wink, like it's been a year.
T&FN: It may not be true for weightmen, but a distance runner who's been out of competition for 8 years is Mr. Fat.

Oerter: It's disaster. If I had continued throwing through the 8-year period, things would have been much easier for me right now. I would have had, obviously, much better distances.

I would have the regimen down pat; I'm still monkeying around with things, trying to get everything down so it's comfortable for me. Although I'm a weightman, it's still difficult getting everything together.

T&FN: One of the reported reasons you quit in 1969 were the injuries. . . .

Oerter: Well, that was the easiest for everyone to understand—because I was injured. But it really wasn't something quite as dangerous as was portrayed.

I did have a cervical disc problem, and it was somewhat dangerous—if it went out of place, cutting some nerve. But I never felt that. I think doctors tend to be somewhat alarmist anyhow.

But the real reason I quit was I felt a little guilty about taking all the time for myself. Which was something I didn't realize until quite recently.

At that time, everybody was setting goals for me. I didn't have any goals for myself. Everyone expected me to go to Munich in 1972 and compete for my fifth medal. And the way things turned out, everybody said, "See? You should have gone. You would have won your fifth medal."

But I didn't really appreciate everyone else's goals. I didn't have any of my own, and it became very uncomfortable. Not

only was it physically uncomfortable—because of the injuries, the lesser of the evils—but mentally it became very uncomfortable. So I left.

Over the 8-year period, I've realized a lot of things. When I started back, it was so apparent that it was comfortable now. I could go back and reestablish and reassess and start working hard and not feel guilty about time. It's quite real right now.

T&FN: There was a lot of disbelief—and some shock—when word first came out: Oerter is back. Throwing 200 feet is proof enough to me, but how would you respond to those people who say: "This is just a hoax, this try for 1980."

Oerter: Oh, I'm definitely trying for 1980. Everyone just has to believe me. I've set goals.

When I started this whole thing, I did it with a certain amount of intelligence. I just didn't start out by getting on some kind of crazy drug program. I'm on a very layered approach right now, where I'm trying to build for 1980.

I set my goal, in 1976, to throw 180; in 1977 to throw 200; 215; and 225. My first year, I threw 181, which means I had started. The important years were last year and this year.

If I could throw 200, that means I had settled on some type of training regimen that would allow me to throw the necessary distances to compete effectively. Just throwing 200 is, obviously, not very good.

But to get up to 200, you have to be mentally devoting the time, the training sessions, the lifting sessions. Your diet is coming around. Things like this.

If I throw 215 this year, that means I've been able to refine my regimen, and—more importantly—I've begun to learn the technique of the event, which is something I haven't worked on since 1954.

T&FN: Many people might not realize that you at your peak were a 212-6 thrower, that your first three Olympics were won at 200 or less. So what accounts for this quantum leap in improvement?

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Oerter: Well, I thought I was working in 1968 at 100% of my capacity, and in 1976, that was just not so. I could tell that in the 8-year period I had not aged appreciably. I wasn't falling over myself, sitting in the corner drooling. I still felt—even though I wasn't doing any weight training at all—that I never really got that weak. I could still handle myself on the tennis court; carrying ladders around.

I thought then that I could exceed what I had done in 1968, and that's proven to be true. I'm now lifting at a level that exceeds what I was doing in 1968 by about 10%.

T&FN: *Is it classified information?*

Oerter: No. Then I was doing 425, perhaps on a good day I would lift 440 in the bench. And now I'm up to 475, and next winter I'll be going well over 500.

This winter has been a little bit of a vacation for me. I've taken all of my vacation time. I went to a film festival in Italy.

To get back to why it's possible to better 1968: I think I can improve my strength levels. And I've never worked on technique other than in high school, when I learned how to throw the thing in 1954.

The technique I learned then may be refined a little bit by all of the competition, but, essentially, I never worked at it. I was always trying to be as strong as I possibly could.

Silvester always said "freight train arm." And that was always true. I was a terrible technician. This is one of the reasons I'm out here at this meet. Obviously, I have no business being here with all these good throwers. But they've learned how to throw, they've refined Jay's technique. They have their own techniques now. And I want to pick up a few things tomorrow.

I want to go back to New York with what I've learned, to apply it. Bud Greenspan's taking plenty of tape.

T&FN: *In the past, your pattern has been like Lasse Viren, where he'd lie low between Olympics and have this 4-year plan to get ready. When you were competing in the early-60s, people thought of you as a nowhere man before the Olympics, but a crazyman during them. How much of that was psyche, and how much of that was intentional?*

Oerter: That was with great purpose at that time. I didn't try to avoid the other competitors. It's just that I felt a little strange taking all of that time for myself with a growing family.

And as a result I tried to minimize it. I came out to maybe three or four competitions—and that would be a lot—on the coast, and then I'd go to a national championship and forget about the whole *Bible of the Sport*

thing for the year.

T&FN: *Is it more fun that it was before?*

Oerter: I was going to say so. I feel this much more enjoyable environment than I felt then—except for the Games. The Games have always been very special to me. But the effort leading to the Games at times was pretty severe. Now, it's continual effort for the next 2½ years.

T&FN: *What will it take to make the*



Paul Sutton/Duomo

team?

Oerter: For me to make the team, it's going to require a very good training program. Maybe it sounds a little dumb, but it means a program that is designed to enhance the way I throw.

I don't think I have any mental difficulties. I think I've accepted the challenge very easily. If I can continue as I am without injury—and that's really the only thing that's going to stop me—my program is very well designed, and it's leading toward a 225 throw.

I think that's what I'm personally capable of. I know I'm not capable of 240. If I can throw that (225) in the good competitions, there's a chance I can make the Olympic team.

T&FN: *That's 225 without wind?*

Oerter: That's a little bit of wind. I'm not talking about throwing into a whirlwind. I don't think anyone can throw 225—except, perhaps, Mac—with a wind coming over his back.

T&FN: *Who's coaching you?*

Oerter: No one. I just don't like working with coaches or psychologists or physicians. Because all of a sudden my

values are a picture of their values, and I'd rather do this entire thing for myself, by myself—that's make the team or not make the team, whatever will come out of it.

T&FN: *What's your weight now?*

Oerter: Two seventy-five.

T&FN: *That's the same as 1968?*

Oerter: In 1968, I was up in the 290s, but that was right before the Games and I skinned down. There was a personal effort in Mexico City to take off lots of poundage before the competition because I was just carrying too much. So I threw about 280.

T&FN: *Is that 275 natural weight?*

Oerter: I can gain weight eating salad if I'm training. It's just my physiological breakdown. If I stop training, I can eat spaghetti eight times a day and lose weight. It's the training that puts on weight or takes off weight—which is great.

T&FN: *Tell us the Greenspan story again, how you became inspired to make a comeback.*

Oerter: That was kind of the first moment when I felt comfortable about going back. I was contacted by Bud and Nancy Beffa, and she asked whether I would like to participate in *The Olympiad* series.

I said I would, and we went to Randalls Island, an old decaying stadium. We went inside the stadium, and they had a setup—a screen and a projector—and showed some films of the 1956 through 1968 Games and asked me to do some voice-overs.

I did that, and we went outside and filmed some more things in the stadium. I had competed there a lot of years ago, and as I was going through, talking about the Games, my mind was kind of wandering through the stadium. I said to myself: "I competed here. I made an Olympic team in this decaying, terrible place." You know, that really felt good.

Several days, maybe a few weeks after that, Bud and I were having dinner, and I said, "Your taping was interesting, but more than just participating in film, it had kind of rekindled this whole feeling for track and field. I love throwing and I'd love to get back into it, with the goal of, maybe, trying for the 1980 Olympics."

I didn't really have a 1980 Olympic goal at that moment, but I thought perhaps I'd go for the 1980 Games, at least get as good as I possibly could. And that started it.

T&FN: *And he would make a movie of it?*

Oerter: He wanted to film the whole thing, I guess from the start. He filmed some competitions last year, and he's filming some things this year. In fact, Bud is now beginning the final drafts for a

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T&FN: Have you ever used steroids?

Oerter: No. I can't see, particularly at my age, getting on a program where I'm going to have to wind up relying on some placebo.

T&FN: A lot of athletes have commented on something, how they've become disenchanted with the continued politicization of the Olympics. In 1956, it was bad, but it's my impression it seems to have gotten worse—with the expulsion of various teams, the boycotts and the screwed officiating. That hasn't bothered you?

Oerter: Never. I participated in the Games because I considered them to be a celebration.

It upset me, in 1956, to see two Russians approach two Hungarians on the sidewalk and who was going to move? The Hungarians moved to the outside and spat on the sidewalk before they moved out. That kind of thing upset me. It should not have been. But I know there cannot be a utopian society, even though we'd like to have it.

But that never impacted my feeling for the Games, which I saw as a bunch of guys and gals doing what they wanted to do. Some of them are perhaps coerced or forced into it, but they really wouldn't be there if they didn't like what they were doing. They get off on this sport. There had to be some feeling for the event they were competing in.

When we're on the floor of the stadium competing, I don't think they realize the kind of colors that you wear or what country you're from. All they're looking at is a bunch of discus throwers who have some kind of credibility.

They've thrown a certain distance or have a certain competitive record. And the competition seems to proceed, always, on a very individual basis. We respect one another for the capability in the discus throwing ring.

Now that doesn't mean that if they receive the medal that there isn't a tremendous feeling of nationalism. It's always overcome me. Whenever I stood up on the podium to receive the medal and they played *The Star Spangled Banner*, my hair stood up. The top of your head comes off.

It's a very exciting, special feeling.

So there's a great deal of nationalism there. But I've never had the feeling: "Ha! That's one for the United States, and zero for some other country." I've never had that kind of competitive zeal in the Games. It's always been a very special feeling for the country I'm representing—after the competition.

During the competition, it's strictly me.

T&FN: What will you do with your fifth gold medal?

Oerter: [Laughs] I have no idea. It would be fun to make it to the Games, but I really can't project beyond that. □

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