

**B**ack in 1976, when little Sergey Bubka probably still thought a pole was a guy who lived in the country to the west, Earl Bell was already a World Record setter (18-7/8) and about to make his first Olympic team.

The Soviet now claims the WR, but at an age when most vaulters are settled down to raising little Sergeys of their own, the 31-year-old Bell is vaulting better than ever. He has no thoughts of retiring. Why should he? He's vaulting better than ever, and his life is better than ever.

He and wife Phyllis still live in Jonesboro, Arkansas, where he went to high school and college. He still benefits from the sage advice of Arkansas State coach Guy Kochel, his longtime mentor, and enjoys passing on his knowledge to upcoming ASU vaulters.

He's also proud of finishing his degree in accounting last year after putting the final touches on his education on hold for many years. "I'm very educated, intelligent and incredibly smart now," he laughs.

The ability to laugh and remain carefree on the surface while being deadly serious underneath—a trait shared by nearly all Pacific Coast Club stars—has enabled Earl to remain near the top for as long as he has, breaking the 10-, 11-, 12-, 13-, 14-, 15- and 16-foot barriers in consecutive years before skipping to 18, a mark he hasn't been under in 13 years now:

**T&FN:** Did you know that you and Kozakiewicz were tied?

**Bell:** For what?

**T&FN:** Most years in a row over 18-feet. So you have to keep going until he quits.

**Bell:** How far back does that go?

**T&FN:** 1975.

**Bell:** Goodness gracious. I must have been 6 years old then.

**T&FN:** Do you feel older now?

**Bell:** No. As a matter of fact I'm feeling quite a bit stronger.

**T&FN:** Stronger doesn't mean anything. I feel stronger too, but I definitely feel older.

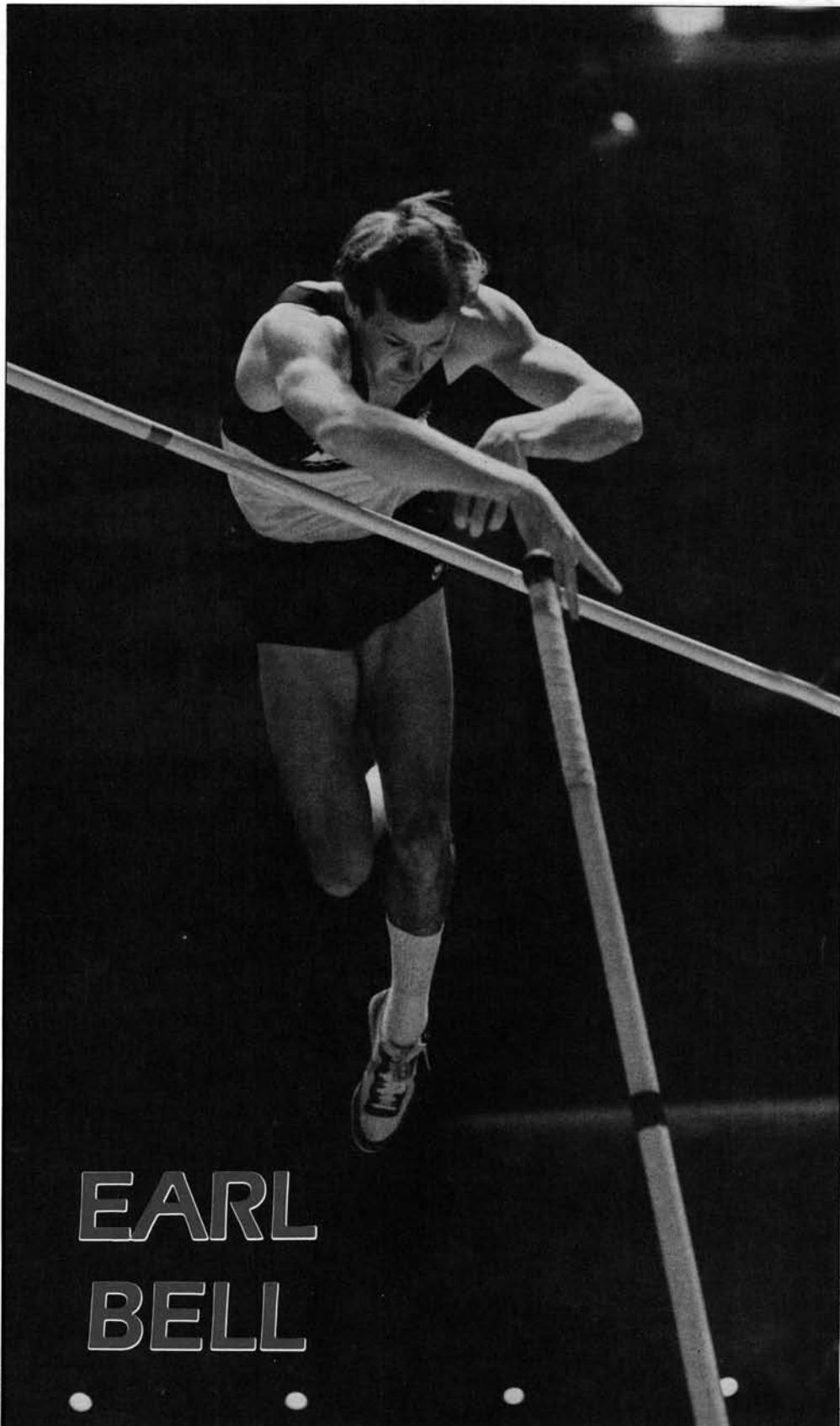
**Bell:** Stronger in every sense though. Stronger in that I'm running better, faster. Stronger in that I have more stamina, just outright power.

**T&FN:** Are you taking better care of your body?

**Bell:** That's probably what it is. You know, everybody learns to take care of himself, no matter how dumb you are. Eventually you figure things out.

**T&FN:** Now, wait a minute. . .

**Bell:** OK, so you're still abusing yourself. Let's put it this way, you know when you're not going to get away with something. Ten beers and you realize, "I'm



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going to have to pay for this the next four days."

**T&FN:** *Why have you stayed in it when everybody else hasn't? Your 1976 Olympic teammates [Dave Roberts and Terry Porter] are long gone.*

**Bell:** It's a tough way to make a living. It's hard to make a consistent year-in/year-out income; where you don't have to go do something else for a living.

When you have to start doing other things it takes away from your training and it's just hard to stay in the sport. I've been lucky that on my bad years I didn't go broke and have to get out.

I have kids at school here and they say, "I want to do what you're doing. I want to go to Europe and do this and that." And they ask, "What can I do?"

I'm kind of at a loss, really, so I say, "First thing you've got to do is jump about 19 feet and get everybody's attention. Sometimes that might not even be enough."

**T&FN:** *Your weight has gone up a bit over the years.*

**Bell:** I'm 180 sometimes now. In 1976 I weighed 165, and everything just gradually crept up. It was about a year and a half after that that I discovered that my left leg was shorter by about three quarters of an inch. By then I was up to about 173 and started having hip and lower back things blowing out here and there. I got that straightened out, but I guess as you get older the weight just keeps creeping up.

I tried to resist that, but it was at the cost of some strength I think. Now I'm just trying to do a program of "eat what you think you need—eat smart and work and train like you think you need and just let the weight go where it wants to go."

**T&FN:** *As long as you're converting it to usable flesh, not just turning into adipose tissue. I know all about that.*

**Bell:** Bad deal for a pole vaulter. Too much baggage in the old compartment.

**T&FN:** *So is Earl Bell planning on winning in Rome?*

**Bell:** I plan on being a contender. That's the only way to go towards big meets. You've got to think in terms of being there and having the opportunity because if you get ahead of yourself things go kablooey.

**T&FN:** *How about Seoul?*

**Bell:** Oh yeah. I'll just be a spry young 32-year old, so I've got to figure I'll be in my prime.

**T&FN:** *How does a PR feel at 31?*  
**Bell:** Yeah, that was amazing, wasn't it?

**T&FN:** *Was it a decent one?*

**Bell:** Nah, I bent the bar down. It wasn't a clean jump or anything. I don't think it should have stayed up.

**T&FN:** *Does that diminish the feeling of accomplishment?*

**Bell:** Well, you know, I'm on the list, so what the hell!

What's bad is that for years I've been trying to get them to make a rule that if you put your hand on the bar you automatically miss. It's an easy one to enforce.

But here's me swinging over 19-2 $\frac{3}{4}$  with a full both-hands grip on the bar and it stays up. What the heck, the rule hasn't changed yet, so I'd be a fool not to do it.

**T&FN:** *How important are marks to you at this point?*

**Bell:** To me, not; not in terms of being personally satisfied with what I'm doing. But realizing how important they are to the meet promoters, shoe companies, etc., that are looking at that list, as opposed to guys like you who can take an overview of what's really going on. . .

You'll go to the Olympic Trials and there's me and Mikey and the rest of them out there, who you gonna pick? Two old dogs who don't have as high a jump but always seem to get up there in those major meets. But these guys'll look at a list and say, "Here's Tully and Bell, they got marks of 19-even. Goodness! Look at all these guys at 19-6."

**T&FN:** *Like. . .*

**Bell:** You'll notice I'm careful not to say anybody's name.

**T&FN:** *Is Bubka any kind of phobia for you?*

**Bell:** A phobia? Nah.

**T&FN:** *But he's so high. Do you realistically feel you can beat him? Obviously, on "any given day" you feel you can, but can you beat him at the World Championships?*

**Bell:** I came away just today from the most encouraging workout I've had all year. So I'm very optimistic that even if things don't start happening immediately, I'm right on the trail here.

If you start jumping 5.90s, then get to 6 meters, you're going to beat Bubka every now and then.

**T&FN:** *But how would you feel if all of a sudden he was jumping 20 feet, something you knew was simply beyond your physical capacity? Bubka, or anyone else.*

**Bell:** Try saying 21-feet.

**T&FN:** *Oh! OK, something impossible; would you want to chuck it all in?*

**Bell:** No, it wouldn't matter. It all comes down to your point in time. It's something you can't pick. Eventually, somebody's going to jump 21 feet. That doesn't matter; you've got to keep working at your own pace and your own point in history and just do the best you can.

He is kind of like having a Beamon every day though.

**T&FN:** *Does it help that you have a World Record plaque? That's something you'll never lose: at least for your little moment in time you were the best.*

**Bell:** Of course, but I still insist to

people that it's a soft event, and Bubka's living proof. The outdoor World Record he's cleared now; he sailed over that baby like it was a warmup jump.

I'm sorry, this is a soft event; it's second only to the 400 hurdles. Excuse me, well maybe the women's triple jump!

I'm just not sure that the right guys have come along yet to start hammering at it.

**T&FN:** *Let's talk about speed. Are any vaulters able to utilize every ounce of speed they have?*

**Bell:** That's pretty much the name of the event. Most people talk about a vaulter having to be a sprinter, a gymnast, all of these things combined, but the main thing he's got to be is a runner. If you can't get it down the runway as fast as the guys are now, you're not going to be jumping 18 feet. You've limited yourself if you can't sprint.

It's all running now, and the trick is, right now there's a lot of guys coming into the last few steps as fast as Bubka is. But nobody else is as efficient at getting that energy into the air and onto the pole.

Power is the mysterious thing that's tough to measure that Bubka seems to have. He has a combination of speed and strength and a very efficient posture with a dash of unknown timing collecting everything and just goes ka-boom over the bar. But running is the No. 1 thing.

**T&FN:** *What vaulters are you high on in the U.S., other than you and Mikey, the old fogies?*

**Bell:** I keep telling Mikey he's too old to vault, but he's a year younger than me. It's not working.

It's hard for me to pick anybody. I don't trust anybody under 30. □

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Earl Holmes Bell was born August 25, 1955, in Ancon, Canal Zone, and is 6-4/180. Graduated from Jonesboro High School in Arkansas ('73) and Arkansas State ('77). A three-time NCAA champion, he cleared a WR 18-7 $\frac{1}{2}$  in 1976.

His indoor PR of 19-2 $\frac{3}{4}$  this year puts him 4, =10 on the world all-time indoor list and 3, =5 on the U.S. list. On a combined indoor/outdoor list, Bell is 6, x W and 3, =7 A.

His finishes in major meets: '74-8)NCAA, 1)TAC Jr; '75-2)1)NCAA, 4)TAC, 1)Pan-Am; '76-1)NCAA, 1)TAC, 2)OT, 6)OG; '77-1)NCAA, nh)TAC; '78-dnq)TAC; '79-4)TAC; '80-nh)TAC, dnq)OT; '81-3t)TAC; '82-dnq)TAC; '83-5)TAC; '84-1)TAC, 3)OT, 3t)OG; '86-2)TAC.

His progression (with World and U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	PV	Year	Age	PV	
1968	12	10-7	—	1978	22	18- $\frac{1}{2}$ (x, 5)
1969	13	11-6	—	1979	23	18-0i (x, 5)
1970	14	12-7 $\frac{1}{2}$	—	1980	24	18-4 $\frac{1}{2}$ (x, 6)
1971	15	13-6	—	1981	25	18-6 $\frac{1}{2}$ (6, 1)
1972	16	14-5 $\frac{1}{2}$	—	1982	26	18-6 $\frac{1}{2}$ i (x, 4)
1973	17	15-6	—	1983	27	18-5 $\frac{1}{2}$ (x, 3)
1974	18	16-8 $\frac{1}{2}$	—	1984	28	19- $\frac{1}{4}$ (7, 2)
1975	19	18-1(A) (3, 1)	—	1985	29	18-4 $\frac{1}{2}$ i (x, 4)
1976	20	18-7 $\frac{1}{2}$ (4, 2)	—	1986	30	19- $\frac{1}{4}$ (5, 1)
1977	21	18-4 $\frac{1}{2}$ (4, 2)	—	1987	31	19-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ i