Back 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 1/4) 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 Sergey 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 long-time 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?


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 your self. 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
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 19-2½ 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 are 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 go opening 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 Beacon everyday 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’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 anyway 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.


His indoor PR of 19-2½ this year puts him 4-, 10 on the world all-time indoor list and 3-, 6 on the U.S. list. On a combined indoor/outdoor list, Bell is 6’, 12 and 3-, 7 A.


His progress with World and U.S. Rankings in parentheses:

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>22</td>
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<td>1979</td>
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