

T&FN INTERVIEW

Reese Hoffa

by Sieg Lindstrom

Meet a man with perspective; a shot putter wired for both speed and the long haul: Reese Hoffa. He solves a Rubik's Cube in 30 seconds as a sideline, has spun the iron ball out to 73-7/4 (22.43), and the only major gold medal he hasn't won is Olympic, though he snared the bronze in London.

The tag that glide proponents sometimes put on rotational throwers is inconsistency, but it's hard to say that about Hoffa. World Ranked No. 1 four times ('06, '07, '12, '14), the '01 Georgia grad has rated globally each of the past 13 seasons, throwing past 21m (68-10/4) every year since '04, and over 70ft in all but one of those campaigns ('05).

With a skein of success that long, it's no surprise that Hoffa, No. 9 on the world list at age 38, was the oldest putter among the world's top 50 performers last year—just one of two born in the

Steve Hoffa and later by teachers and coaches, that has seen Reese throw back at life spectacularly.

Hoffa is the first to say he values the journey far above the medals—so much so that he's only mildly troubled that his Olympic bronze was stolen from his manager's car a couple years ago.

T&FN touched base with Hoffa as he ramped up his swan song season and continued what will be his fulltime vocation next year, *The Hoffa Throws Academy* in Watkinsville, Georgia, near Athens.

T&FN: You're now "The Old Man Of The Shot." No one would second-guess your decision to make another grab at the Olympic rings—you won the Diamond League in '14— but how are you approaching it?

Hoffa: Well, the ultimate goal is to make the Olympic team. I can't even think about winning Olympic gold until I make that team. It will be an exceptionally tough team to make with Joe [Kovacs], Ryan [Whiting], Jordan [Clarke], Kurt [Roberts], Ryan Crouser.

There are so many talented throwers out there right now. A real victory will be making the team and then in that month-and-a-half period before the Olympic Games, that's when the prep and the thought of actually getting a medal will come in.

T&FN: When did you decide to give it another go?

Hoffa: It was a little bit season by season. In 2014, I decided, "OK, if I win the Diamond League and get an automatic bye to the World Championships in 2015, then I will stay for the 2016 season."

In '14 I didn't throw well all the time but I threw well enough at the right times to win the Diamond League and then stick around.

I didn't have a great season last year, just kind of showing some wear and the grind of being a professional thrower for as many years as I have. It was a hard decision. I mean I wanted to make sure that if I hung it up in 2014 that I did everything I possibly could to extend to '16, and then once that actually happened it was easy.

T&FN: You threw your PR in '07, the year you won an outdoor world title to go with your indoor winner from '06. Do you believe throwing farther is still possible?

Hoffa: Good question. In my

Hoffa In A Nutshell

•Personal: Michael Reese Hoffa was born October 8, 1977 (born Maurice Antawn Chism), in Louisville, Kentucky; 5-11¼/293 (181/133).

PRs: SP—73-7¼/22.43 (7, 10 A), 72-6½/22.11i (8 W, 6 A)

Schools: Lakeside HS (Evans, Georgia) '97; Georgia '01; now represents New York AC/Nike

Coaches: David Machovec high school, Don Babbitt college & pro

Major Meets: 14)NCi, 11)NC '98; 15)NCi, 11)NC, 8)US '99; 12)NCi, 4)NC, 6)OT '00; 9)USi, 7)USi, 3)NC, 6)US '01; 6)USi, 6)US '02; 5)USi, 3)US, nq)WC '03; 2)USi, 2)WIC, 2)OT, nq)OG '04; 2)USi, 5)US '05; 1)USi, 1)WIC, 2)US '06; 2)USi, 1)US, 1)WC '07; 2)USi, 2)WIC, 1)OT, 7)OG '08; 3)US, 4)WC '09; 4)USi, 2)US '10; 3)US, 5)WC '11; 1)USi, 4)WIC, 1)OT, 3)OG '12; 2)US, 4)WC '13; 3)US '14; 4)US, 5)WC '15; 2)USi '16

World/U.S. Rankings: '00—x, 5; '01—x, 6; '02—x, 7; '03—8, 4; '04—5, 3; '05—2, 3; '06—1, 1; '07—1, 1; '08—3, 2; '09—3, 2; '10—2, 2; '11—3, 2; '12—1, 1; '13—3, 2; '14—1, 1; '15—6, 3. Has 99 World Ranking points for No. 3 on the all-time list

'70s, and incidentally, at 5-11¼ (1.81), also the shortest of the bunch.

Famously and poignantly—for Hoffa has advocated adoption publicly for many years now—all that achievement grew from humble beginnings and trauma when the future star was 5.

That's when, Hoffa explained in a recent TEDx talk, his birth mom "loaded [Hoffa and his brother] up in the family car and she drove to the St. Vincent-St. Thomas Orphanage and she gave us up for adoption. That was the single most difficult day in my life.

"After that, I kind of recovered a little bit and I came to the realization that if I can survive this moment, I can survive anything that life throws at me."

The moment began a journey, propelled first through the care of adoptive parents Cathy and



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dreams I’m PRing all the time but I think just physically I’d have to change my technique a little bit and figure out a way to keep a throw like that in the ring, so I’d have to say no.

It’s more just trying to be consistent at a high level. If I can get a little bit above 22m, 22.20–22.10 [low 72s] and be consistent at that kind of mark then it will serve me really well. It’s not that I need to PR; I need to throw at a high enough level at a major championship to win the gold.

With Joe and Ryan and some of these guys who have the capability of going 22m almost at will, I’m going to need that in the arsenal. If I could PR, that would make things easier but right now I just haven’t seen that in a practice, I haven’t seen that in my training.

It’s more about surviving Olympic Trials and putting together the best possible throw during the Olympic Games.

T&FN: *What do you bring to the contest that the younger competition might not have?*

Hoffa: When you’ve been doing something for a long time a particular way and you start making changes to that technique there’s going to be a bit of a learning curve and I like to think I’m a little bit more throw-savvy so I should be able to make those changes a little more quickly.

But there’s always that unknown: What will happen? And that’s why I’m doing a lot of meets early to try to hone what I need to do to modify my technique to get the maximum amount of speed on that ball and make it go somewhere and not put myself in a position where I will foul.

I don’t worry about it in the meet. I’m going to go out there and if I foul, I foul; I’m not going to make a demon of the toeboard.

T&FN: *After nearly 20 years at a super-elite level, do you still try new things with your technique?*

Hoffa: Yeah. I’m always thinking of different ways to make my technique a little bit more efficient. If I did the same thing over and over again, then everything would have to be the same. Physically, I’d have to be exactly the same, mentally, everything about me would have to be exactly the same in order to keep my technique exactly the same forever.

I’d have to have the same strength levels, going into the year everything would have to be perfect, and the reality is there’s always going to be

some change—internal, external—so you have to make some small changes to your technique.

That’s where understanding the throw and what, physically, you’re able to do, taking that and putting in the technique is crucial. The basics of my technique will be generally the same. But the approach varies.

One year I might be sweeping the right foot into the middle of the ring a little lower, at another time a little higher. The emphasis

The Evolution Of The Turkey Trot

A tenet of modern sport is that athletes should also be entertainers. Hoffa has done his part. The Home Depot meet in ‘03 comes to mind. Wearing a Mexican wrestling mask, he created a stir placing 2nd as “The Unknown Thrower”—and PRed by more than a foot (68-7/20.90) in so doing.

His first comic turn, though, was at the ‘00 Drake Relays when he started his turkey leg victory-lap tradition. What inspired him?

“At Drake the throwers usually just go up there, get their award, step off the stand and go about their business. I wanted to be the first thrower to do a victory lap, so I did that, it was awesome. This was in college, my second win in a row so I wanted to do something special.

“At Drake they have those turkey legs for sale around the outside of the track. So I told my roommate at the time, he was a distance runner, what I was going to do.

“I think I took the lead in the fourth or fifth round and held it, and he ran and got the turkey leg. They announced that I won the shot put, he handed me the turkey leg and I took a victory lap with it—and, I think, made a lot of memories not only for myself but for the people there.

“Because I think a thrower doing a victory leg with a turkey leg kind of fits. If a distance runner would have done it, it wouldn’t fit very well, it wouldn’t be as funny or well received.”

of the left arm sweeping into the middle of the ring may change, sometimes a little slower, sometimes a little faster. How far back? Everything’s gonna change.

In 2014 I hurt my knee so I couldn’t push off my left leg out of the back of the ring so I had to modify to a technique that allowed me to almost fall and do a lot of right-leg sweep to generate enough power to throw 71-feet that year.

Also, when you’re older your nervous system is not going to fire as fast, so how are you going to generate the extra speed that you’re going to need to put it in the ball?

So I’ve dropped a little weight, changed a few things on how I’m entering the ring, those kinds of things.

T&FN: *In your 20th season with the same coach, Don Babbitt, what are your dialogs like?*

Hoffa: With me and Don, primarily I’m just shooting ideas to him in terms of what I can do—the mechanics, where I’m going to put my foot and that stuff.

Don takes a look at it and says, “OK, If you’re going to do this, this is what potentially could happen so you’re going to have to counteract it

Hoffa — continued

with this, you might need to go a little slower here so you can accelerate there.” What I’m going to try to do is more on me and Don is that safeguard.

T&FN: *You’ve certainly had a productive partnership for a long time. Hopefully the best is yet to come, but are there one or two competitions you look back on most fondly?*

Hoffa: I’d have to say winning an Olympic medal; that’s always going to be special. Winning my first world [indoor] championship in Russia. I will always look back fondly on those kinds of experiences. But also just the places I’ve traveled to: going to Japan, that’s by far one of my favorite countries to go to.

T&FN: *And you won a world title there too.*

Hoffa: Osaka, yeah. I’ve been there a few times other than that to do clinics and just hanging out with Koji Murofushi, the hammer thrower.

T&FN: *With the current structure and your established status, most of your foreign travel is to Diamond League meets and World Championships. Your wife probably appreciates that your trips are shorter. You’ve been married for 10 years?*

Hoffa: Yup, 10 years. My wife, Renata, has been a math teacher for 10 years now, head of the math department. She’s an ex-thrower. She was a 2000 State champion in the shot.

She threw the hammer at Georgia, that’s where I met her, and I guess I was just lucky enough she thought I was cute enough to be married to. I married up; how ‘bout that?

T&FN: *What do you do in your spare time?*

Hoffa: I like playing golf. I grew up in Augusta, Georgia, so golf is in there; my dad taught me how to play. From time to time I play a few video games. I don’t play as much now.

I think it’s more hanging out with my wife

and friends around here, going to burger places. We have three breweries around here so I’m really big into that social aspect—just hanging out with friends. It’s more teacher friends, some of them I work out with. So just hanging out with people and just doing fun stuff.

T&FN: *Do you have to deal with an awe factor*

make this team. This is not going to be easy.

In order for me to make that team, I’m going to have to crush someone else’s dream to make my dream a reality. I know that a lot of these kids are going to fight with everything that they have to make that not happen.

And if I do make it, I’m going to have huge

Hoffa’s victory lap tradition is a unique one when there are turkey legs to be had



KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

with your friends, being an Olympic medalist?

Hoffa: Maybe in the beginning. It’s just more normal and that’s the way I want it to be.

T&FN: *Any sadness that your long career as a professional shot putter will soon be over?*

Hoffa: I am very happy to still have the opportunity to compete. I’m very excited about the prospect of making my fourth Olympic team. I know it’s going to be really tough and I think that’s part of what I really like about trying to

respect for those athletes because I was in those same shoes, trying to make an Olympic team, and the reality is you have to do everything in your power. If you save anything, that could potentially cost you the opportunity. It’s going to come down to who’s the most committed.

I know that I am getting there commitment-wise. I also realize there are other people out there who are working way harder than I am, and if I don’t make it, they obviously earned it. □

A Rookie’s Life On The Road

Discouraging on his travels in more than a decade as an elite thrower, Hoffa spoke at some length about “going to Malmö, Sweden, right when I began my [pro] career in 2004 or ‘05 and staying there for 3 months.

“That was a lot of fun, just getting that experience, being on my own, figuring out what I needed to do training wise, figuring out how to feed yourself when things are in other languages, and figuring out ways to entertain yourself for 3 months when you’re around the same people all the time. It was a very interesting experience.

“Back then there were so many track meets and I was younger so anything that I could get into, I did.

“When we got there we needed a place to stay so my manager, Paul Doyle, figured

out a way to get into a hotel that was about to be destroyed. We stayed there for about 4 days and before they kicked us out we took like 10 beds from this hotel that was about to be blown up and he found an apartment that had two bedrooms but this really big living room area so we took seven beds and made it kind of a hostel for all the athletes that Paul represented.

“It was me, Breaux Greer, a bunch of women I didn’t know, Adam Nelson may have made a trek there, Carl Brown, who was a discus thrower, some sprinters—we had a lot of people moving in and out.

“In Malmö everything was reasonably close and pretty cheap. They had one central mall and a train to Copenhagen to go where we needed to go. There was a training place, a nice little grocery store right down the street. One day we decided to do spaghetti so we had to figure out which of these ground meats was

for spaghetti. We made tacos one day, just figuring out to survive on your own.

“Doing that I learned a lot more about being a professional than by winning an Olympic medal or winning a world championship. It was more just that journey, figuring out, What do I need to do to make this happen?

“Being in Malmö, staying in hostels and military bases and all that kind of stuff, that is really where you learn how to be a professional and how to become a champion in a way.

“Once you get there, if you don’t have those experiences and know what to do when it gets really tough, you’ll just get gobbled up and spit out and you’ll never have an opportunity to get that medal. If you’ve been battle-tested in a way, the odds that you’ll get that medal are a lot higher.”