

T&FN INTERVIEW

Jackie Joyner-Kersey

by Jon Hendershott

Much has changed for Jackie Joyner-Kersey since our last question-answer interview with her. At the time of our last talk four years ago, she had just set her first heptathlon WR.

At the time of our latest conversation with the 28-year-old superstar and husband/coach Bobby Kersey—on the last morning of the Olympic Festival—she could claim setting four heptathlon records, plus one in the long jump, not to mention golds in both the Olympics and World Championships and a pair of our Athlete Of The Year plaques.

She could rightfully be considered the finest woman athlete in the world.

Delightfully, all the honors, records and accolades have hardly fazed Jackie. She still is the same open, friendly, caring person she always has been. But make no mistake: she is as driven as ever—both to enjoy the sport and to keep drawing out the very best from within herself:

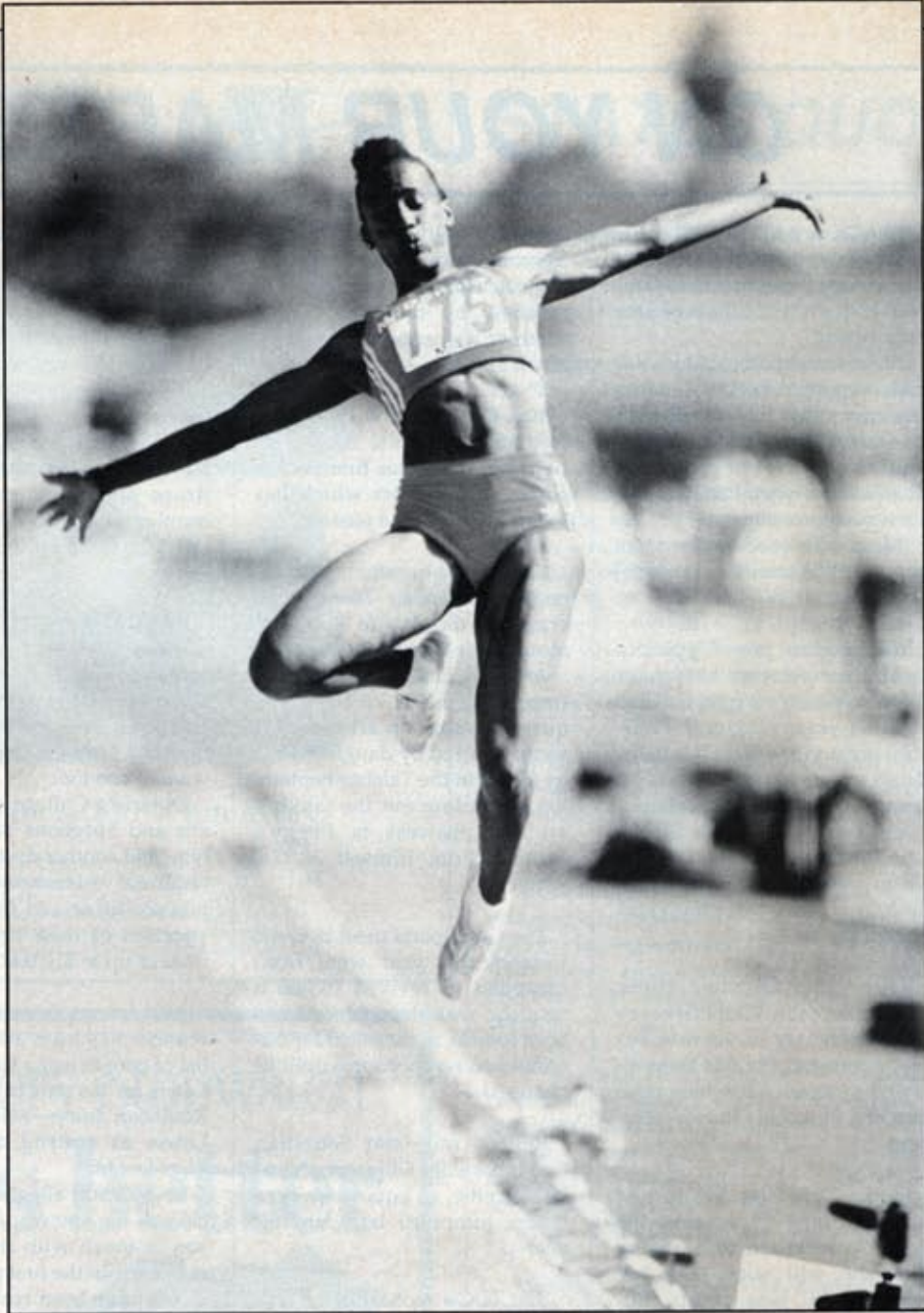
T&FN: *At the end of our last formal interview with you, in September of '86, you looked forward to winning major gold medals and setting more World Records. Now, you have everything, so what keeps you excited and motivated in the sport?*

JJK: One main thing for me still is that I like the sport so much. I like working hard, competing with the other women and just being in the competition.

I've always told Bobby that even if I have records or titles, my desire to compete is still there. A gold medal always was a major goal, but I didn't want to stop there. As long as I felt that desire inside, then I would stay in the sport, continue to work hard and give it my all. So, the biggest factor is that I still *enjoy* what I'm doing.

T&FN: *The motivation has shifted from the outer—like winning a gold medal—to the inner, like satisfying yourself?*

JJK: Yes, it has. Very often I put the



ALLSPORT/Im Defisco

most pressure on myself because I'm a perfectionist. I want only the best. There's nothing wrong with that, but it can be hard sometimes because I get impatient.

I have to learn patience, so when the time does come to execute, I'm prepared and the marks can happen.

T&FN: *How have you tried to change your attitude compared to the past?*

JJK: I tell myself to enjoy what I'm doing, but also realize I'm still working hard so that good performances might come. But don't put pressure on myself that I've got to do something.

My attitude in the past was like that, because I didn't have a gold medal or a World Record. But now, I can enjoy what I do while still performing very well.

T&FN: *While you have big overall goals, like 7300 points, do you go into a competition wanting a specific performance or just a sense of self-satisfaction?*

JJK: I have certain performances in mind, but the primary thing is making sure that Jackie is happy. If I do the things I'm prepared to do, the times, marks and totals will come. I'll be happy and know I've given a top effort.

T&FN: *Are you your toughest critic?*

JJK: Oh yes, and that's where Bobby is so important. If I'm displeased with something, he has pointed out, "In the past, you weren't a World Record holder, or a World Champion or an Olympic gold medalist. Having those goals to shoot for made things a little easier."

But now I'm all of those things and I have to realize that I can be my own worst enemy. I can beat myself by being too critical. I have learned to see how the various parts can fit together down the road to make up the whole picture.

T&FN: *Is that the toughest thing you have learned in the past 4 years, to see the overall forest and not just certain trees?*

JJK: It is. [laughs] And like last year, learning I can't remove myself from the total heptathlon picture. I need to still do the shot and javelin, my weakest events.

This year has been hard to get back into them after not doing them at all in '89. I just did hurdles and sprints, which come easy for me. For the future I know I'll have to keep throwing in practice and never again let them go for a year.

T&FN: *Since setting your first World Record and all that followed, has one thing been the toughest to adjust to?*

JJK: Hmm. . . I'd say all the traveling and time demands. It's hard for me to say no to people. Bobby is good in that aspect, too, because he can tell me, "No, you can't go there."

Last year, I went everywhere and tried to satisfy everybody, to the point I forgot about myself. When I tried to get back to heavy training, my body just broke down and I had serious problems with my asthma.

But we intended for me to give as much time last year to my sponsors as I could, knowing Goodwill, the Worlds and Olympics would come up in following years. All of my sponsors—adidas, McDonald's, 7-Up, Primatine Mist and Chipman-Union (a sock maker)—were just great to allow me that leeway.

They now know athletics is my top priority and their attitude shows me they care about me as a person as well as their representative. They are willing to sacrifice too, so that I can reach the goals I have. I'm very grateful to them—but I've also learned I can't do everything I want.

T&FN: *Looking at the time from your first WR to now, is there anything you'd do differently?*

JJK: No, not really. Everything worked according to the plan Bobby set up when he started coaching me in 1981. I made the U.S. team that year to meet the USSR, but he wouldn't let me go. He didn't feel that, at age 19, I was ready yet to meet the top heptathletes. Bobby said my time would come and it did.

I think the problem with a lot of young athletes is they don't understand that you have to be patient. Your time will come and you have to be ready for it.

You can't be so eager that you want it when you aren't fully prepared.

T&FN: *Bob, what are Jackie's strongest assets as an athlete? Is her patience one?*

Kersee: Yes, and also that year-round, she keeps herself in excellent physical condition. Even when traveling, Jackie follows very consistent habits of eating, sleeping and training.

"Last year I went everywhere and tried to satisfy everybody, to the point I forgot about myself."

Also, whenever she competes her approach is, "I'm not going out to embarrass myself. I'm going to make sure I'm ready to be competitive. I may not win, but everyone will know I was prepared and gave it my best."

The final thing is that she simply enjoys her athletics. It's nerve-racking to me many times, especially when there are things to do but she is so gregarious and relaxed.

But that's the key element that keeps the pressure off her—when she is talking with people, she is relaxed and then can have that focused concentration when she needs it in the competition.

T&FN: *Jackie, with all your success, have you ever felt you have to behave a certain way to live up to any image that's portrayed of you?*

JJK: I just be myself. I express that in speaking to kids: "What you see is what you get." I think people often are surprised that I'm as easygoing and approachable as I am. But that's just me, so I've never had to change my image.

On the athletic field, I'm personable with other athletes. But when it's time to compete I attack my events aggressively, knowing the competition is the most important thing. Then off the field, I have the time to interact with people.

T&FN: *For the umpteenth time, do you have a favorite between the long jump and the heptathlon?*

JJK: Oh, the long jump is my favorite. I just enjoy it so much. I enjoy the other events, too, but long jumping has always been extra special to me. Even when I

was a young girl, coaches wanted me to sprint and do other events—but I wanted to long jump first. I'm still that way.

T&FN: *You've mentioned 7300 points, but what other goals do you have? Bobby has talked of regaining the long jump WR.*

JJK: Honestly, I'd like to score 7450—then leave the heptathlon alone! [Laughs as Bobby shakes his head and says, "7450 will be the death of me."] We haven't really gone after the long jump since '87. That was the first time we abandoned most other multi training to concentrate on the LJ—and I feel that cost me the heptathlon WR in Rome. Not doing as much endurance work, to save my legs for jumping, cost me in the 800.

So we learned not to try for another record plus the heptathlon, except in the Worlds or Olympics when I'm trying to repeat as champion. I'd like to get the long jump record again—but Heike Drechsler is back and I'm sure she's thinking the same thing!

T&FN: *Do you have any timetable of how long you'll stay in the sport? At TAC, Bobby said eventually you two will have to start work on some little Kersees.*

JJK: I've decided to stop putting a limit on when I'll retire. I used to think '92 would be it. But I know that after '92, I'll want to run indoors in '93. And Evelyn Ashford and Merlene Ottey are competing very well as they get older.

So why put a limit on myself? Especially when the excitement, tenacity and desire are still there. I just love competing. □

Jacqueline Joyner-Kersey was born March 3, 1962, in East St. Louis, Illinois, and is 5-10/155. Graduated from Lincoln High School in East St. Louis in 1980 and competed for UCLA through 1985. Currently competes for the McDonald's Track Club.

PRs: 100—11.71 '86; 200—22.30 '88; 400—53.64 '90 (51.0r '85); 800—2:08.51 '88; 100H—12.61 AR '88; 400H—55.05 '85; HJ—6.4 '88; LJ—24.5½ AR '87; TJ—43.4 '85; SP—55.3 '88; JT—164.5 '86; Hept—7291 WR '88.

Progression (World & U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	100H	LJ	Multi
'74	12	—	16-9	—
'75	13	—	17-1¾	—
'76	14	—	17-5	—
'77	15	14.7w LH	18-8	3471pent
'78	16	14.6 LH	18-2½	3680 *
'79	17	14.8 LH	20-7½ (x, 8)	3830 *
'80	18	14.88w	20-9¾ (x, 6)	4048 *
'81	19	14.54	20-11¾ (x, 10)	5754 (x, 2)
'82	20	13.81	21-1½ (x, 6)	6066 (x, 2)
'83	21	13.58	22-1½ (x, 2)	6390 (x, 2)
'84	22	13.53	22-4¼ (x, 3)	6579 (9, 2)
'85	23	13.07 (x, 9)	23-9 (2, 1)	6718 (3, 2)
'86	24	12.84 (x, 2)	23-4½ (6, 1)	7158 (1, 1)
'87	25	12.80 (7, 1)	24-5½ (1, 1)	7128 (1, 1)
'88	26	12.61 (8, 1)	24-3½ (1, 1)	7291 (1, 1)
'89	27	13.14 (x, 8)	(dnc)	(dnc)
'90	28	12.81	23-2¾	6701w