

## T&FN Interview

# JAMES BUTTS

by Jon Hendershott

**L**ife has not made it easy for James Butts to achieve what he has achieved in the triple jump.

The '76 Olympic silver medal, the first TJ medal won by an American in more than 40 years; two raisings of the American record this year, first 56-5½ at the Pepsi meet, then 56-6¼ at Helsinki's World Games to become the No. 6 performer in world history. He is the leader of the powerful U.S. triple jump corps.

None of it has come easily. The 28-year-old (5/9/50) former UCLA leaper worked at two jobs during much of his Olympic preparation, getting along on 4 hours of sleep a night (5 was a luxury).

Then it was off to work as a security agent at the May Co., one of the largest department stores in Los Angeles. After that, it was a shift delivering laundry around the UCLA Medical Center.

But it was all necessary. Butts's mother is under a physician's constant care, and he helps his sister through school.

He willingly accepted these responsibilities, all the while he was training for the Olympics he had missed by 3" in 1972 when he placed 4th in the U.S. Trials.

But he made it in '76 and at Montreal he came within 4¼" of taking away Viktor Saneyev's third gold medal.

And Butts is still supporting his family—while jumping better than ever. He is convinced he can be the first man to hop-step-and-jump beyond 60 feet—which would be a marked raising of Joao Oliveira's 58-8¼ world record.

He is squarely on the road to Moscow, and has been since Montreal.

Butts is a quiet man and although his voice is soft, he is tough-minded and determined when it comes to achieving the goals he has set out for himself in the fine art of triple jumping.

And working to achieve something is nothing new to James Butts.

**T&FN:** Things were tight before and after Montreal with having 2 jobs and all that, but you had goals of what you wanted to jump at that time so you have kept working toward those goals. But in terms of work, are things still pretty tight in your life?

**Butts:** Well, I cut the hospital job loose. Trying to train and compete and hold 2 jobs was just too much to deal with. I still have the security job—and going to work unarmed every day definitely keeps my adrenaline flowing.

**T&FN:** There was a story in the papers earlier this year about you catching 2 thieves who had run into a funeral.

**Butts:** I dress in everyday clothes on the job; sort of blend into the furniture, you might say. They took some merchandise right in front of me and walked out.

They saw somebody coming after them, so they ducked into a mortuary. Sat with the family, no less. I just waited outside until it was time for the family to come out and then we snatched both of them, one at a time.

**T&FN:** Do you get much of that kind of thing?

**Butts:** We're faced with different situations all the time. Being on the job unarmed is dangerous in itself. The incidence of bodily harm is high and it can worry you, especially if you are thinking about competing on a world-class level after being hurt.

**T&FN:** You're just back from Europe. This was really your first full summer over there.

**Butts:** Yes, and it's been a good learning situation. I've had to adjust to the European environment. Some countries were very dusty, others had more pollen, others were dry or cold, so my body had to continually adjust.

It was good for learning how to compete, train, condition, besides getting familiar with my competition over there. And I was breaking records while doing it. That keeps me really souped up and fired up and ready to do what I have to do.

**T&FN:** How is your training situation at home now? At the time of Montreal,

you had to get up at 5 in the morning to train.

**Butts:** Since I cut out one of the jobs, I don't have to get up at 5. Now I get up at 7. I have to be to work by 1 in the afternoon and I work until 10 at night. It has worked out a little better. I just have to concentrate on getting more rest and staying healthy.

**T&FN:** And you still care for your mother and help your sister in school?

**Butts:** I'm still faced with that situation. I've had raises at work which have helped some, but I did give up the other job, so I've had to conserve more than I did before.

My mother is still under doctor's care. I get all the bills. My sister is going to school. I'm in a kind of brother-father-son situation. It's a role I've accepted because that way I can be understanding, try to be a son and also take on a burden that my mother would otherwise have to take on.

**T&FN:** After Montreal, you talked about the sacrifices you made to prepare for the Games, both physically and mentally. But now you do have your small goatee and beard back, two things you willingly gave up then. Would you say you have been able to ease up a little on yourself in terms of what you can give and take?

**Butts:** I'm still disciplined on most of the standards I set for myself. But I do consider this to be an "off season." I was traveling every day, so I didn't worry so much about shaving. The beard is there because I feel I'm in training right now.

When I go into the major competitions, it will be just like going into combat. I'll go in there in full battle dress. The beard will be gone. I was clean-shaven at the time of the AAU because I was disciplined for that competition.

But this is a training year. It isn't a Pan-Am year, it isn't an Olympic year.

Track & Field News

Those years you will see a definite change in me; I'll be doing everything geared to my standards.

**T&FN:** Did you train through your meets in Europe or did you point for certain ones?

**Butts:** I took each one as it came. I did have something specific to shoot for though, whether it was the stadium record or just bettering what the previous winner jumped there or just jumping against myself.

I want to keep a certain standard and class in my event. If you go into a competition feeling the quality of the field is down, that will reflect on what you do. I go into every meet with a sense of pride in what I do and I keep that sense high.

**T&FN:** Is it accurate to assume that winning the Olympic gold medal is still your No. 1 motivation?

**Butts:** Yes, everything is leading to 1980. I want the gold medal. Right now I have to face a lot of situations in pursuing that goal and also in making a living.

And I know that Viktor Saneyev has won the last 3 gold medals. But I plan on being in his way this next time.

[Pausing for a moment, he continues, speaking in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone, but his manner is such that his determination is clearly evident.]

I also want to be the first 60-footer. Some people might say, "It's nice to talk about such a thing, but it will be some time before anybody does that." Well, when a person sets a goal for himself that is very high, but very important to achieve, then it takes time. You don't just do it overnight.

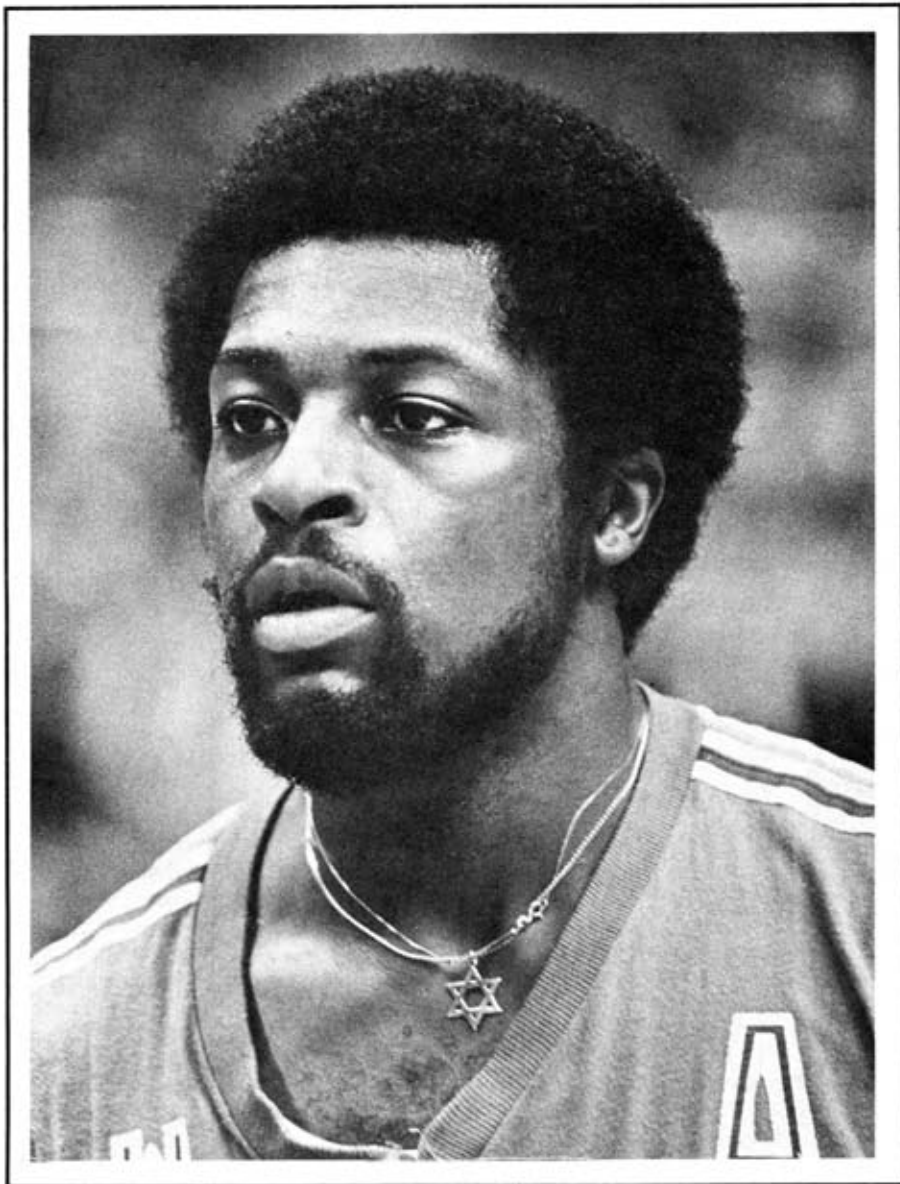
Oliveira was a 54-footer before he went to Mexico and altitude and, boom, suddenly he went 58. I've never competed at altitude, except indoors, but if I can compete in a top meet outdoors, the world record is gone. I've trained hard enough to know I can do it.

I don't need altitude, because I know I can break the world record at sea level. Conditions would have to be just right—especially no wind.

**T&FN:** Is 60 feet the real goal, or is it just to break the world record?

**Butts:** Well, it's like this: going through each of the hop, step and jump phases, 60 feet means just lengthening what I do now. Right now my phases are 21, 19 and 17, which is 57 feet if I hit them each exactly right.

For me to hit 60, all I have to do is step on each one of those: 22, 20, 18.



That's 60 feet.

It could well happen. I'm a 25-foot long jumper. I'm strong. I've been working hard on building up my right leg, which used to be my weak leg, so it can get to be as strong as my left leg.

It's just a matter of time. In one meet, I'll ride it almost to the end of the pit and I'll have that jump. I've had the feeling this year.

Helsinki was very cold and damp and I usually don't jump well in those conditions because I can't loosen up. But that day I was really pumped up. I went down there on my third jump and it happened: 17

meters, 24. It was a very relaxed, easy jump.

**T&FN:** Some athletes say a top effort didn't feel good, but this one did?

**Butts:** I had a lot of good control on it. Looking back, I know I could have rode it out even more. That's why I know 60 feet is more possible than I ever thought it was before.

**T&FN:** What is behind your very consistent jumping this year?

**Butts:** When I didn't make the '72 Olympic team, I was jumping at a certain level of consistency, but also trying to peak at the right time. After I didn't make the team, I realized that consistency is the key.

If you jump 54 feet consistently, it doesn't matter all that much if a guy pops 56 or even 57. He might do it only once and then it's on his mind whether he can do it again. But I know in my mind that when I jump 55, I can come right back and do it again. So I know I'm a constant threat all the time.

Also this year, I've jumped so that I hold back a good jump. If somebody gets that one lucky jump, I know I can come back and improve.

I feel you have to be considered dangerous on any jump. If you have only one good jump, everybody will find that out and once that round is over, they will know you're neutralized.

I don't think you can be consistent without knowing you can

reach back on that last jump. You can't count on others to fire you up. You have to do it yourself.

**T&FN:** Looking back, might it have been a "good" thing not to have made the '72 team? Might this have been a real spur to your motivation?

**Butts:** Well, I'll never know what I could have done, but since I didn't make the team, that did make me all the more hungry over the next 4 years to do everything I could to make it to Montreal. There have been a lot of hurdles to climb to get this far.

But you have to have a goal to achieve

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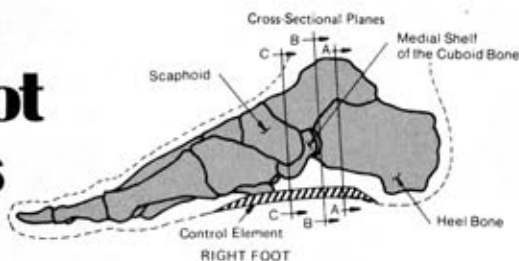
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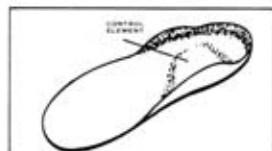
Cross Section A



Cross Section B



Cross Section C



Rear Foot Control

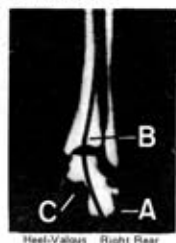
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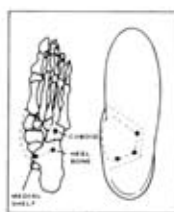
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anything. If you don't you won't put out as hard as you can. You won't try to go beyond, to places you've never been.

Before '72, I was jumping around 52 feet and I was very happy with that. I thought that was the ultimate I could do. People convince themselves, "I can't do any better than this"—and they don't.

But I have the goal of jumping 60 feet. I feel I can. I might not make 60 feet ultimately—but I might make 59 feet while I'm trying and that's not shabby at all.

*T&FN:* You missed the American record by  $\frac{3}{4}$ " at Montreal, and then broke it by  $\frac{1}{4}$ " at the Pepsi meet this May.

*Butts:* Well, I may have jumped 57 feet on that jump, but I sat back yet I still jumped 56-5 $\frac{1}{2}$ . So if I can hold each phase a little longer and land in a more stable position so I can slide out of the jump, I know I can pick up another 3-4 feet.

*T&FN:* Three or four feet?

*Butts:* That's right and I don't hesitate to say that. That day, my first two phases were good, but I didn't finish it out. I need to concentrate on completing the jump entirely and on sliding in at the landing.

*T&FN:* How was the Helsinki jump technically?

*Butts:* The technique was very nice, relaxed and easy despite being so cold. I didn't think it would be that long. But I was very pleased with that effort, very pleased to have lengthened the record. Then I could go on to something else. That was a good jump on that day, but it told me there is much more there.

*T&FN:* What would conditions have to be like to jump a world record?

*Butts:* Oh, it would be great to be like California. Sun, warmth, a fast facility, good competition. I would love a competition among, say, the best Brazilians, Poles, Rumanians, a Russian or two, plus myself and the other leading Americans. There would be enough excitement to produce some very interesting results.

If nothing else, it would be competitive and that's good. That's when the adrenaline flows and the body reacts to that stimulus. It's just a matter of controlling everything.

That's what I like so much about track and field: *you* do it. You decide what you want to do, you work for it, and achieve it—or don't achieve it.

It's really a great feeling to go out there and do things according to your concepts and see how you respond to your own demands. That is a great challenge. □

### BUTTS'S PROGRESSION

Year	Age	Mark	US Rank	World Rank
1970	20	52-0	7	—
1971	21	53-3	7	—
1972	22	54-7 $\frac{1}{2}$	3	—
1973	23	54-2	4	—
1974	24	54-1 $\frac{1}{2}$	2	—
1975	25	52-11 $\frac{1}{2}$	—	—
1976	26	56-4 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	2
1977	27	55-2 $\frac{1}{2}$	4	7