

Jeff Hartwig

Jeff Hartwig laughs, "The other vaulters tell me I may not hold the World Record, but I am the vaulter with the largest number of snakes."

In vaulting terms, the 32-year-old Jonesboro, Arkansas, resident is the American Record holder who owns the largest number of reptilian pets, 74 by Hartwig's latest count. While snakes have been a passion since childhood, his first AR came in '98 and the recordbreaking continued this year.

But at the Worlds, communications problems with officials tripped up Hartwig and he didn't make the final after the pole ripped out of his hands. He had cleared at least 19-feet in nine meets prior to Seville and followed with three more post-Worlds.

Hartwig has filed away the Seville experience for reference in the coming Olympic campaign. As he trains with coach Earl Bell, Hartwig looks ahead to better things, the Games certainly but more raisings of his AR as well:

T&FN: You said after your AR in Eugene that you look for the chance to try a record in nearly every meet in the prime part of the season. Conditions weren't the best in Seville, but is a championship meet a setting to try for a record?

Hartwig: To me, a title meet is a bit of everything. Something Earl and I have really worked on is getting ready for the biggest meets. He has said that it won't always take your best jump to do well in a championship

meet. Not too many guys really jump well in the big meets, but we are seeing that happen more often.

I looked at Seville as an opportunity to kind of do everything: I wanted to do really well and to do that, I knew I had to jump high. As it turned out, [Maksim] Tarasov's winning height was equal to my AR.

T&FN: After all the confusion in the qualifying, was not advancing a great disappointment considering those possibilities? Were the problems mainly out of your hand?

Hartwig: While yes, you can argue the situation was out of my hands—literally [laughs]—everybody had to deal with the same situation. I heard everyone else also complaining that the officiating was bad, the communications were bad. Yet a lot of other guys made it through fine.

I think that the overall depth of the field was definitely affected by the atmosphere, the officiating and the way the competition was run. Yet if you look at the final results—Tarasov wins at 19-9, Markov 2nd at 19-4 $\frac{1}{4}$ with no misses—it was really outstanding.

But something involved is that all year we travel and compete on the European circuit. We're used to dealing with really, really excellent officials. People who know how to run a meet and a vault competition. There are very few of what we call "hassle factors" at virtually all the major European meets.

But then we got to what is supposed to be the big meet of the year and because every athlete put more time in preparing for it, they're all more nervous and excited. All the emotions that go along with any title meet competition are added to miscommunications and hassle factors they put you through at a meet like that.

T&FN: What did you learn from Seville's title meet situation that will benefit you in Sydney — other than the officials will speak English?

Hartwig: One of the greatest satisfactions I get from the sport is that just when you think you've come up against every situation or adversity, it always offers something new. So I do look at it as a learning experience.

For me, I considered the qualifying round as more a hassle than anything else. That morning, I talked with Petra Lobinger [wife of German vaulter Tim]. She said, "Everyone seems more nervous for today than for the final." I think most of the top guys tend to see qualifying just as a formality.

I was probably guilty of that because I went into the qualifying thinking like the sprinters: "I don't want to go any harder than I have to so I can conserve energy for the final." So that's probably the biggest thing I learned: even

though the qualifying round is like a formality, I've got to treat it like a regular competition, make the right decisions and get through it.

The thing I could have done differently was just plan to jump at every height. Try to make it on my first try and that still might have added only one more jump I had to take. How much would that have worn me out for the final? Not very much. So if I made a mistake, that was it.

T&FN: Do you try to look at a situation like Seville as "I'll find the positive in this and remember it for Sydney"?

Hartwig: That's the thing. Up to about '97, when I went into qualifying rounds at past U.S. championships, it was something I had to be really ready for. I wasn't yet at the level where I could just pass until I took one jump to advance. I had to look at qualifying as a mini-meet.

And it can happen to anyone. Remember that Tarasov didn't get out of the qualifying at the Russian nationals in '96 and it cost him an Olympic team place—and the chance to defend his title. Since then, he has competed virtually flawlessly and I really believe that experience in '96 carried over with him. He isn't going to make that mistake twice.

I feel like my situation is exactly the same. It affected me mainly because I lost the opportunity to jump when I felt really good. Sometimes that happens only once or twice a year and you have to take advantage of it. I really feel that the way I set everything up, this season was a test for next year. I felt really ready in Eugene and in Seville. I told myself before the Worlds that regardless of the outcome of the competition, I wanted to gauge how I felt physically. Did I set my training up right so I was in my best shape when the biggest meets came around?

T&FN: In an ideal world, then, you try to combine winning a title meet with the chance to jump a record?

Hartwig: Yes. How I will approach next year in those terms is, you try to go into the title meets in your very best condition. Then you can, in fact, produce the best effort of your life.

At the same time, you've still got to go into those situations to compete for the high places. When Earl says it doesn't always take your absolute best effort to place well in those meets, a lot of it has to do with guys losing their normal focus. They lose focus on what they're trying to do.

But, if I could win the Olympics at 18-feet, boy, I'd take that gold medal home, hang it on the wall and show it to anyone who would look at it. I also know that basically any time I jump now, I can jump an AR. But you get

HARTWIG IN A NUTSHELL

Jeffrey Stewart Hartwig was born September 25, 1967, in St. Louis, Missouri, and is 6-3/185. Graduated from Howell High (St. Charles, Mo) in '85, Florissant Valley CC in '87 and Arkansas State in '90. Holds the American Record both indoors (19-6 $\frac{1}{4}$) and out (19-9).

Major Meets: nq)NCAA ('89); 13)OT ('92); nq)USATF ('93); nh)USATF, 1)OF ('94); 7)USATF, 2)OF ('95); 2)OT, =11)OG ('96); 4)USATF ('97); 1)USATF, 3)WCup ('98); 2)World Ind, 1)USATF, nq)World Ch ('99).

Progression (with World and U.S. Rankings):

| Year | Age | Affiliation | PV | Rank |
|------|-----|----------------|--------------------|--------|
| '82 | 14 | Missouri HS Fr | 9-0 | |
| '83 | 15 | Missouri HS So | 11-0 | |
| '84 | 16 | Missouri HS Jr | 12-6 | |
| '85 | 17 | Missouri HS Sr | 14-6 | |
| '86 | 18 | FVCC Fr | 15-0 | |
| '87 | 19 | FVCC So | 16-1 | |
| '88 | 20 | redshirt | 16-9 | |
| '89 | 21 | Arkansas St Jr | 17-6 $\frac{1}{4}$ | |
| '90 | 22 | Arkansas St Sr | 17-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ | |
| '91 | 23 | unattached | 17-6 $\frac{1}{2}$ | |
| '92 | 24 | AthAd TC | 18-4 $\frac{1}{2}$ | |
| '93 | 25 | unattached | 17-6 $\frac{1}{2}$ | |
| '94 | 26 | Bell Athletics | 18-5 $\frac{1}{2}$ | |
| '95 | 27 | Bell Athletics | 18-9 $\frac{1}{2}$ | (x, 9) |
| '96 | 28 | Bell Athletics | 19- $\frac{1}{4}$ | (x, 4) |
| '97 | 29 | Goldwin TC | 19-2 $\frac{1}{4}$ | (x, 5) |
| '98 | 30 | Goldwin TC | 19-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ | (2, 1) |
| '99 | 31 | Nike | 19-9 | (?, ?) |

by Jon
Hendershott



JEAN-PIERRE GUYON

only a very few chances to win a major.

T&FN: *Sometimes a vaulter can win by taking just a couple of jumps; sometimes he jumps a dozen times. You train for the physical effort the event requires, but is it possible to describe the physical toll the vault takes on your body?*

Hartwig: My 19-8^{1/4} in Athens in mid-June was my 15th jump—and I took a total of 18. In Monte Carlo just before Seville, I took 17 jumps; made every height on my third try, it seemed. My 19-6^{1/4} was my 14th jump.

But you condition yourself to where you'll be really strong. I think that for most elite guys, once you get beyond about 12 jumps, you're pushing the limit of what you can do on a given day. Yet I've had situations when there was something extra on the line and I was pushing it really hard and went up to 18 jumps or so and felt fine.

Actually, I think qualifying should be called an "elimination round," because it serves to eliminate the field to a manageable size to have a good final. So as I look at Sydney and also the Trials, I want to advance.

T&FN: *On a different subject, was it about Eugene time that you joined the HSI group? What's a vaulter doing with all those sprinters?*

Hartwig: I'm adding color to the group [laughs]. I've actually petitioned Emanuel Hudson to change the name of the group to "Handling Serpents Intellectually." If those guys are going to hang out with me, they've got to have more reptiles in their lives.

T&FN: *So how did you end up having all the snakes you do?*

Hartwig: Growing up, I just had a passion for reptiles. It probably started with a trip to Chicago's Museum of Natural History. I saw the dinosaur skeletons and thought they were the coolest thing. Then I thought it would be great to have a reptile. And it helped that my parents were terrified of them.

But if anyone is to "blame" for me getting snakes, it would be [former vaulter] Lane Lohr. He moved to Jonesboro about 1990 to train with us and Lane had a 10-foot python. I really liked it and was at his house almost every day to play with the snake. Lane eventually went back to coach at Illinois but the faculty housing there had a rule of no snakes, so I kept it.

The 74 snakes I have now are all my personal pets. I still breed some, too. I do have to be careful to balance the two worlds of reptiles and track. Luckily, when the snakes are pretty high maintenance is at the end of my season when I have more time. I've got more snakes this year coming to breeding age than ever before. If everything goes well, they could produce 250-300 babies—which is a bunch of snakes. □