

Joe Kovacs

by Sieg Lindstrom

“That’s the most exciting thing... just making the ball go far, putting on a show and enjoying it, and putting out some new chalk lines that have never been put down”

Only six men have ever put the shot farther than Joe Kovacs. In fact, no one besides Kovacs has exceeded his 74- $\frac{1}{4}$ (22.56) best since '90 when the 27-year-old Penn State alum was not yet a year old.

Naturally, the reigning world champ wishes his Olympic performance—long enough to have won all but two earlier Games (see p. 28)—had got the better of OR-setter and friendly rival Ryan Crouser, but he is sanguine, even bullish, for the years ahead based on his longtime late-bloomer status.

“I knew I always had trouble putting things together when it mattered,” Kovacs says. “When I played football in high school, I went from starting behind a coach’s son and never being able to play and then I was All-State my senior year.

“Everything happened in the last minute; same thing in track. I threw 56 feet my junior year, which was a solid mark, but I ended up throwing just over 65 by the end of my senior season. It was a very last-minute-put-together feel, which I don’t like, but now I’m realizing that’s one thing I love about the sport too: that the best years are still ahead.

Statistically, the peak ages, I believe they say, are between 29 and 32. That’s definitely exciting going into Tokyo, knowing that statistically that’s on our side. And the other thing is that knowing myself, I take a little bit longer to get it done, to figure out a way, but once I figure it out I can definitely capitalize on it.”

Having lived the last four years at the Chula Vista Training Center guided by throws master coach Art Venegas, Kovacs is changing things up a bit to start the new quadrennium.

He’s living in Northridge in the LA area, guided day to day by former training partner turned CSN coach Eric Werskey, and will add in every-other-week sessions with Venegas in Chula Vista.

When Werskey trained alongside Kovacs in '13 and '14, Kovacs recalls, “Eric was kind of my interpreter for Art sometimes. Art would tell me to do something and I would look up and he would give a look at Eric and Eric would tell me real quick what to do. I’ve made a change but it feels like it’s not a change because I’m still working with Eric

and Art. So it feels like it was the right move.”

T&FN spoke with Kovacs as he was ramping up his fall training in November.

T&FN: Your Twitter feed suggests you had a busy fall. You made a trip home to Pennsylvania and were honored at a Penn State football game and a high school game?

Kovacs: Sure. I went to Bethlehem Catholic High School and I’m from Nazareth, Pennsylvania. Nazareth and Bethlehem Catholic were actually playing each other in a football game so I was able to more or less kill two birds with one stone because it was being played in Nazareth, the community I grew up in, and Bethlehem Catholic playing them so I was able to see so many people.

I did the coin toss at the game and I was able to put my medal on a bunch of little kids, which was really, really fun. They loved getting pictures, they loved putting the medal on.

T&FN: You seem to have a very strong connec-

tion with the area.

Kovacs: Sure. I'm from a real small town in Nazareth. My father was a teacher in the Nazareth school district. When he passed away there were so many people then who reached out and supported my family and now are supporting me on this Olympic journey. I've just been surrounded by so many people who've just done whatever they can to help me out.

It was amazing just to be able to go back and just say thank you to them and put some names to faces—because I was getting emails and letters from people in my hometown throughout this whole journey this past year—and go back and give everybody a hug and let them all put the medal on. And to have some good food with them too was definitely special.

T&FN: A local brew pub there put a Joe Kovacs Burger on their menu?

Kovacs: Yeah, and a beer. I got a beer named after myself too. One of my friends from high school actually opened this little brewery. It's taken off quite a bit in the area. It was really fun to be able to go there and, after a long time, to see people's faces from high school and all through growing up. Everybody was able to come to common ground and have some good beer and good food together. People came from all over, which was really, really fun to see.

T&FN: The Joe Kovacs burger is quite a sandwich. It's a burger with a chicken breast and bacon on it as well?

Kovacs: Yeah, it had all the meats on it. Of course. It should. I was definitely happy with it having the Kovacs name on it, it was delicious.

T&FN: You've had a really eventful two years. Are you now reset for the next four?

Kovacs: Sure, sure. It really helped going home for a while and taking a breath. Four years ago when I decided to keep on throwing after college, I had no business keeping on throwing after college. I somehow hit a big mark at the Trials and it opened up the doors for me.

At that point, I was looking to get what I'd call a real job and half the reason I stayed in the sport was because more or less I was ticked, I was pissed off that I didn't make the team. I mean I had no intentions of making the team when I went to Eugene in 2012, I was hoping maybe I could make the final.

Then to be 4th and not make it, it felt like I was so close to something that I didn't even know. So that's what kept me in this past 4 years, the drive.

Now it's different. Of course, making the team was a big deal, coming back with the silver. Of course, you wanted it to be gold too but you kind of just have to realign some things and find the

next motivational thing.

Not to say I'm happy and content with everything but I feel like that little chip on the shoulder always has to be there for me and that has to be the driving force that will take me all the way to Tokyo.

T&FN: You got your '16 seasonal best about a month before Rio at the London DL but have said you were not fully in the groove.

Kovacs: No, I don't think that all of last year I was in any good rhythm. I think I was getting lucky off of previous training, being in good shape, but I think technically I was missing a lot of the consistency in the reps, and I was able to get away with a lot more things also with all the rhythm and speed I developed working with Art the past three years before that.

It was getting too easy to throw right at 22m but to get to that next level I would have had to break it down. I think that that's something Art and I had to deal with—that once you kind of see the ball going far, it's hard to stop that and reassess that and go back to training.

So I took the gamble that the winning rhythm's there, it's building. But the rhythm

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JIM MOCHIZUKA/IMAGE OF SPORT

Kovacs In A Nutshell

Personal: Joseph Mathias Kovacs (koh-vax) was born June 28, 1989, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; 5-11/290 (1.805/132)

•PRs: 74- $\frac{1}{4}$ /22.56 (7, x W; 3, 3 A), 70-5/21.46i

•Schools: Catholic, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania HS '07; Penn State '12; now represents Nike

•Coaches: Joanna Kovacs & Glenn Thompson, high school; T.J. Crater, college; Art Venegas & Eric Werskey, pro

•Major Meets: 3)NCi, 18)NC, nm)US '10; 14)NCi, 3)NC, 14)US '11; 6)USi, 4)NC, 4)OT '12; 6)US '13; 3)USi, 1)US '14; 1)US, 1)WC '15; 2)OT, 2)OG '16

•World/U.S. Rankings: '12—x, 4; '13—x, 5; '14—3, 2; '15—1, 1; '16—?, ?

didn't come together as much because the positions were a little bit off.

T&FN: Can you specify what you might do differently to find the groove you had in '15?

Kovacs: Sure. I think I have to focus not as much on the rhythm of the throw and the momentum of throwing far day in and day out as much as breaking it back down and being in a good position to apply force.

For me especially, I think once I start going faster and faster and faster I can hit some really big throws, but I also start getting a little bit higher off the ground every time and a little bit more of that tippy-toe feeling than being on the ground, being able to push.

And there's a point where once you get a little bit too high off the ground, a little too tippy-toe-ish, that it's hard to keep the throw in. It's hard to be consistent because you're just going so fast, you're not actually applying force.

I think that this next year working with Eric now, that's one of his big things in his coaching: being able to be in a good position to be on balance. I don't think it's a big mystery what I have to do or one of those “aha!” moments. It's something I knew but when you're going into Rio you kind of just have to switch everything off and go full speed ahead with what you got.

T&FN: A lot of people talk about your “77-foot” warmup foul at La Jolla in April of '15. You didn't fly out of the circle and it looked like you could throw that far and stay in the ring. Was that a significant event for you?

Kovacs: I think it was significant just because there were a lot of people there and a lot of people put it on YouTube but I've definitely had a lot [of good] warmups and if I had to pick a favorite warmup that nobody saw or there's not many videos

on it, at Prefontaine a month after that meet I threw right at the World Record in warmups and I kept it in the ring, there wasn't a foul afterwards.

But at that time I was still up and coming and Storl and I were kind of meeting each other for the first time. I ended up throwing just over 22m that day, but the big warmup throw that day I actually held in, no questions of being a foul.

Of course the one in La Jolla I always get questions about just because the ball went far. That's why I love throwing, because the World Record is something I think is attainable and it's obviously one of my goals because of that.

T&FN: How do you like to relax away from the circle?

Kovacs: It's definitely been a complete difference this fall. This past quad it was my own fault but I think I was pushing away fun things and enjoying life because I thought that anything that was fun was going to be taking away from throwing far—even if it wasn't bad.

Anything that sounded fun I didn't do because I would let it stress me thinking that it was going to be bad.

That's why I think this next cycle will be really good. I think living up here in the LA area, in Northridge now, it's nice to go home. Living at the Training Center in Chula Vista is amazing

because everything is in your backyard, you have such a great support staff around you, but you're living in that same area all the time, you can't shut it off. I love the people who I lived with there, who were my roommates, but at the same time you're just talking about track,

come back to practice and kind of turn it on and turn it off. Already I've been feeling a difference, physically and definitely mentally, being able to go out with friends, have a good time.

I'm also hoping to check off my "LA list." I want to get to a Lakers game, a Clippers game, a Dodgers game, all the sporting events in LA.

I want to slowly go down the list of things to experience, like I want to go see a concert in the Hollywood Bowl just to say I did. I want to go the Rose Bowl just to see a game there.

T&FN: The World Record is a goal. But can you target the record or even a PR at specific meets? Or will you just have to let it happen?

Kovacs: I don't want to say I have a résumé now to go off of but there is that stress relief of having a World Championships gold and an Olympic medal where the competitive side, I'm going to say, was at least a little bit proven.

Now I can really take a breath and just go out there to throw far. That's the biggest thing I'm excited for this next year and this next quad.

That's to be in shape and I don't know when it would happen, I don't know how the feeling is because there are always different factors that become involved, but if there's a day that I feel that I'm ready to throw really, really far, I'm going to capitalize on that.

If I feel good I'm going to go find a place to try and throw far because I can and I

enjoy doing that. That's the most exciting thing for this next quad, just making the ball go far, putting on a show and enjoying it, and putting out some new chalk lines that have never been put down. That's the enjoyable part. □



VICTOR SALES/PHOTO RUN

Rio: "I knew I wasn't completely on my game like I was expecting to be with our training"

you're talking about sport, you can't go home and just sit on the couch and watch the news.

Now I think the biggest thing for me that's going to be helpful is just being away from that and being able to go home, take a breath, and

I wanted to be.

"I can't be upset with the silver medal because there's a lot of things I would think if I didn't do I could have come home empty handed.

"Frankly I was throwing farther even than the winning mark in practices but I didn't have consistency and confidence behind it.

"I knew once I got that first mark out there—that was my best mark of the meet—Ryan was going to be throwing some 22-mids.

"Even outside the stadium I was throwing 22-high but it was sloppy throwing, and for me once I start getting wired and moving fast, I can hit some big marks but it's really hard for me to be aware of where I'm at to the point of holding it in from not being a foul and coming

back throw after throw and doing the same thing over.

"Everybody keeps asking me about the [apparently 22-plus] foul I protested to the official. But I see that. Some people say it wasn't a foul; I would have called it a foul too. That throw would have taken the lead at the time.

"I thought to myself, 'It's the Olympics, I'm not going to win on an easy mark.' Ryan wasn't going to make it easy so I had to go after it on all those throws. And I think I was close to putting it together but there were a lot of factors that happened before the event with our training so I didn't have that confidence to really stay in the ring and push the ball farther."

Deconstructing Rio

Joe Kovacs' first throw in Rio would have won at all but two previous Games. This time, however, Ryan Crouser had three longer answers. Kovacs' thoughts:

"I didn't know that stat but I knew it was a far mark. In Rio I saw the way Ryan was training and I knew what was coming. I've been on the other end of that when I'm on fire in training and I know there's no questions.

"So I knew he was going to be in shape and that's why I had so many fouls, because I knew I wasn't completely on my game like I was expecting to be with our training. A lot of things were off, maybe not technically but just confidence-wise of being in the positions