

TOM HINTNAUS

by Jon Hendershott



LLeading the American contribution to the soaring rise in worldwide quality in the pole vault during 1980 was 22-year-old Tom Hintnaus. His 8½" improvement elevated him to the top of the U.S. vault corps and to a spot among the world's vaulting elite.

A 17-8 vaulter as the season started, Hintnaus claimed his biggest victory yet with a PR 18-2½ win in the TAC meet. He went one better at the "Olympic Trials," flying over a career-high 18-4½ for another big win.

After Moscow he turned in a solid record on his first European tour—even if victories weren't frequent—beating European stars Volkov, Houvion, Bellot and Ferreira.

The handsome, easygoing acrobat—born in Brazil, raised in California, schooled at Oregon and now back in California pursuing careers in acting and modeling—reached many lifetime goals in 1980. Those achievements opened the door to bigger and higher things for one of the newest members of vaulting's aerial circus.

T&FN: What do you think might be behind the worldwide explosion in the quality of the pole vault?

Hintnaus: One thing must be better training techniques. And the technique itself is changing. Everyone is learning how to really use the power from the pole, getting more out of the pole.

Everything is just changing and progressing, but I think it all will go a lot higher than it already has. No one has even neared the maximum yet; it's still a young event. The fiberglass pole has only been around for 15, 20 years, and vaulters are only now starting to learn what is the best technique for the fiberglass pole.

What I really think is happening is that vaulters are going back to the old technique, the rigid-pole technique. It's the same basic technique, except that you hold much higher on a glass pole because it bends. But it's the same basic vault. People now are starting to get good coaching in the proper technique on the pole.

What I try to do—and other vaulters are doing it, too, even though they may not realize it—is basically to power through the middle part of the vault, rather than waiting for the energy in the pole to be released. I'm pushing down on the bent pole and putting energy into the pole, which in turn puts the energy back into me. It's like a bow and arrow.

I feel that that is what the event is turning toward in terms of technique and that's why so many people are going so high. What I eventually hope to do is to be able to get a 5-foot pushoff and that should get me near 20 feet in height.

T&FN: Do you know if the top Europeans are doing this or do they do something different?

Hintnaus: Well, in watching the
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French, I have noticed that they hold very high and have a great bottom part of the vault. What Vigneron does is get way, way back and then he goes straight up off the pole. Really, really nice style.

I think a lot of vaulters are getting close to this technique; I've gotten close several times but it is a matter of split-second timing and that takes a long time to perfect. Many vaulters are now incorporating gymnastic movements into their technique—because the vault really has become a gymnastic event.

And the equipment hasn't really changed that much. I really think it's mainly a matter of vaulters developing better technique and utilizing the power the pole has to offer. The energy has to be stored at the bottom of the vault, and the faster you are, the more energy you can store. About 80% of the vault is storing the energy at the bottom and the better technique you have, the better you can store that energy.

T&FN: *Earlier this year, after all the boycott possibilities first surfaced, there was talk of you competing for Brazil in Moscow. How did you come to have Brazilian citizenship as well as U.S.?*

Hintnaus: Well, my parents escaped from Czechoslovakia in 1948 and lived in Germany for 2 years. They wanted to go to the U.S. but they could only get a pass to Brazil so they moved there in 1950 and lived in Brazil for about 9 years until they got a visa to the U.S. I was born in Brazil and lived there for 2 years.

I looked into the possibility of competing for Brazil—their consulate confirmed I still have Brazilian citizenship and I have a Brazilian passport now—but I eventually decided against it. I'm an American and I feel as strongly about that as my father does. I felt that if the U.S. wasn't going, then I wasn't either.

T&FN: *It must have been a big help to have the Trials in Eugene, in your home pit, where you were most familiar with vaulting?*

Hintnaus: It really was. I was definitely psyched for it. Everything worked out just perfectly. I got up that morning and felt great; good and strong. I had peaked my whole year for that meet and it was at home. It was a perfect day—sunny with an ideal tailwind—and I just knew I could do it. It's the old idea of "somebody has to win and it might as well be me."

So I opened at 17-5/8 and missed my first try! You can't miss early in big competitions because that puts you behind right away. But I had just misplaced the standards; I was way over the bar but came down on it so that was easy to fix.

Then everybody passed 17-10 1/2 so I did too because it wouldn't have made any difference to jump. Then the others cleared 18-1/2 on their first tries but I passed again. So at 18-2 1/2, it was a do-or-die situation for me. But I cleared [to match his PR] so

naturally I was really happy. I knew that would make the team.

But I wanted to win and there were still 3 guys left in besides me—Tully, Ripley and Smith. I knew if I cleared 18-4 1/2 on my first try that would pretty much wrap it up. I was so psyched for that try—I had worked 4 years for this and here was the big test. So when I did make it, that took off all the pressure.

T&FN: *How did the tries at 18-11, a World Record height, feel?*

Hintnaus: Surprisingly good, considering I had never attempted anything higher than 18-6. I was right up at it every time. My second try, when the wind blew the bar off just as I took off, actually felt the best. I felt like I was really moving on it. I just have to vault more times at that level to get used to it. I was right there, so I know in the future I can get it.

T&FN: *Then the European tour was your first international competition ever. How did that go?*

Hintnaus: It was the greatest experience I've ever had. It put everything in a different light for me. Going against the very best in the world has helped make me less nervous about it. Now I know that I can beat them on a given day.

I learned how to vault every day, back-to-back, which I could never do before. You travel-and-compete, travel-and-compete. You learn to jump in many different conditions, learn to adjust.

I did okay in places like Stuttgart and Rome, but I know I didn't exactly set the world on fire over there. But I also knew I was past my peak since the Trials were the big meet for me. Plus I had an entire dual meet schedule for Oregon. I had some good meets in Europe, but I knew I wasn't at my best.

Next year will be a lot different because I can train and peak especially for the European season. So I'll be ready for all those guys. See, I had never jumped past June in my whole career, so that was a whole new experience right there. Next year I'll know what's going on and what I can do.

Actually, in looking back, I was very surprised that the Olympics were won with a World Record. The Olympic vault in the past has been well off the world mark. But Kozakiewicz wasn't going to be beaten on that day—and he didn't miss until his first try at 18-11 1/2! So for me to beat him, I would have had to clear a World Record on my first try. Whew! That was a great competition.

T&FN: *The Olympic competition typifies the global upsurge in the event. Even a year ago, 19 feet was outerspace, but now it's common talk.*

Hintnaus: Once people start going that high, others began thinking, "Oh, I can do that, too." A lot of it is mental. A certain height, like 18 feet or 19 feet, is more a mental barrier but once people start doing it, it will become common.

Nineteen feet is right there. It will come soon—and I've always wanted to be the first to clear it. There are a lot of goals I still want to achieve and I won't quit or be satisfied until I reach them.

T&FN: *Besides vaulting, you have a modeling career you are into seriously. How did you get into that?*

Hintnaus: A guy came up to me after the '79 AAU meet and just asked if I had ever considered modeling or acting. I studied telecommunications at Oregon, but nothing like acting. I decided to try it though, and eventually I went to the Nina Blanchard agency, one of the biggest agencies in California, and signed.

The important thing to me is that I had nothing to do with my athletic career at all. I never mentioned it. I have gotten jobs solely on my merits as a model and now as an actor. So it was, and is, very satisfying to know I can get jobs without relying on my athletic fame.

I'm mostly into television commercials. I have done some magazine work, but I like television work much more. Still photography is just that, static. But in commercial work, your personality and how you come across as a person counts a great deal.

T&FN: *Is there a trait in Tom Hintnaus that makes the pole vault especially attractive to him?*

Hintnaus: One of the big reasons I like the pole vault is that, to me, it's like all sports rolled up into one. You need speed, strength, agility. I like all sports, but you can't do everything anymore; you have to specialize. But the vault combines so many athletic qualities.

A vaulter has to have a little bit of crazy in his personality, too. He can't be afraid of anything. At the same time, the vaulter has to have a keen mind so he can follow the competition and know when to pass and when to jump. It can be like playing chess. And that element of risk in it is what makes it exciting.

The best thing about it for me, though, is that it's plain fun. It's fun for me to do it. Some people might go to the mountains to ski, or go hang gliding at the beach, but this is like recreation for me. It's just fun doing it.

And when you do everything right, the feeling is just unbelievable. When it comes in the biggest, most important meets, that is the greatest feeling of all. That's why I'll never forget the Olympic Trials.

Tomas Veldemar Hintnaus was born February 15, 1958, in Videira, Santa Catalina, Brazil. 6-3/182. A 1976 graduate of Aviation High in Redondo Beach, Ca., and a 1980 graduate of the University of Oregon, Hintnaus now competes for the Tobias Striders. Progress (with U.S. rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	School	Mark	NCAA	AAU
'75	17	Cal HS Jr	15-3		
'76	18	" Sr	16-4 1/2		
'77	19	Oregon Fr	16-10	7	
'78	20	" So	17-4 (9)	2	dnq
'79	21	" Jr	17-8 1/2 (10)	dnq	=6
'80	22	" Sr	18-4 1/2 (17)	2	1