

Although Jan Zelezny himself may not care for the title, his career presents a strong case for considering the Czech Republic star as the finest javelin thrower in history.

When it comes to numbers and honors, the mega-honored Zelezny really has done it all, as the accompanying boxes clearly show.

As well as his impressive haul of medals and his dominance in the World Rankings, Zelezny produced statistical superiority as well. He has held the World Record since '93, and at 323-1 (98.48) since '96. He also owns 7 of history's 10 longest throws—including the top 5—and 12 of the leading 20.

Not physically imposing at 6-1¹/₄/194 (1.86/88) Zelezny compiled his stellar record thanks to technique perhaps second to none; a combination of speed, strength and flexibility which enabled him to establish a consistency remarkable in an event stereotypically rife with inconsistent performances.

He has paid the price for his high-torque delivery with ongoing back problems but nonetheless enjoyed almost two full decades on the world stage. His numbers would have been even bigger had he not

was most satisfying? One most disappointing?

Zelezny: Of course the World Record, but also the Edmonton Worlds gold in '01. But the highest level of my capabilities I felt was in '96. I won the Atlanta Games even though I didn't feel very good technically. Both Athens appearances—the '97 Worlds and '04 Olympics—were on the other side.

T&FN: Of your many championship victories, was one most satisfying?

Zelezny: I think the third Olympic gold in Sydney was one of the best. But also this year's European Championships bronze was very special, because some people didn't believe that I could achieve it.

The most disappointing was Athens '04. I was in great shape, but due to an injury which happened only a few days before, I couldn't do what I wanted. I left the stadium in tears.

T&FN: Why do you think you never did win the European Championships?

Zelezny: I think it was just coincidence. I just didn't have the right time and moment. But this year's bronze is worth a gold for me.

T&FN: You said once that winning the Barcelona Olympics—the first of your three consecutive Games titles—was a turning point in your career.

Zelezny: Before Barcelona, I wasn't able to achieve what I really could. That was really the turning point—from then on I won nearly all the important events. Barcelona was a matter of destiny for me—I learned to win. After that I still lost sometimes, but that win took me forward.

T&FN: Did winning that big title of the Olympics somehow make you a more serious, dedicated thrower?

Zelezny: I think I was quite a dedicated thrower before that. But getting older and older, I learned what is really important.

T&FN INTERVIEW

Jan Zelezny

The King Of The World Rankings

In the almost-60-year history of T&FN's World Rankings, no other man has ever scored as well in a single event as has Jan Zelezny in the javelin. He'll rate somewhere around No. 5 in this, his last season, but even without the 6 points that would add to his total, at 150 he's already No. 1, ahead of such luminaries as Carl Lewis (148 in the long jump) and Sergey Bubka (147 in the vault).

This year will also mark his record 19th year in the rankings, breaking the tie he shared at 18 with fellow javelin thrower Janusz Sidlo, discus thrower Jürgen Schult and hammer thrower Yuriy Syedikh.

His ranks: '87—2, '88—2, '89—5, '90—5, '91—2, '92—1, '93—1, '94—1, '95—1, '96—1, '97—2 '98—inj; '99—2, '00—1, '01—1, '02—7, '03—2, '04—7, '05—5.

lost the whole '98 season, right in his prime, to a freak training injury.

Now, six months after his 40th birthday, Zelezny has retired. He reflected on a career unmatched in the history of the javelin—and few other events:

T&FN: Was there one main reason for your tremendous consistency?

Zelezny: I think it was my concentration on big events. Mainly the Olympics in those seasons. I had long preparation periods with small numbers of competitions. That helped me a lot.

T&FN: Was there one single performance that

The Incredible Medal Collection

Jan Zelezny ensured many of his high Rankings by performing very well—if not winning outright—the biggest meet of the year. He's the only man ever to win gold at the World Championships twice, and he did it three times. He also had a pair of bronzes, a 4th, a 9th and a dnq in his record eight appearances.

On the biggest stage of all, he had a record three Olympic golds, and in his record five finals also earned a silver and a 9th.

Overall medal tally: 6 golds, 1 silver, 2 bronzes.

“Barcelona was a matter of destiny for me—I learned to win”

Many details go into making a great final performance. From your genetic background to the people who can help you stay consistent at the very top.

T&FN: In '01, you said you would continue competing as long as you were healthy and mentally wanted to carry on. What happened to make you decide '06 would be your final season?

Zelezny: It was clear that my body could last only for a certain time at the highest level. I was only thinking when the right moment would come. After '05, I analyzed what was possible



by Alfons Juck

VICTOR SALLERPHOTO RUN

Zelezny: It was really a tough situation. But without that injury, I could have been even better because all I did was limited after surgery. So I don't think it was such a big benefit. But of course, we can find some pluses in this situation.

On the other hand, I must say that the situation back in 1989–90 was even tougher. My vertebra was broken and nobody was able to tell me whether I would be able to continue to throw. I realized at that time that everything was in danger. In '98, it was easier because I was already double Olympic champion and also world champion.

T&FN: During your career, how difficult was it for you to cope with the big expectations that you would "always" win the major meets, especially championships?

Zelezny: My only concern was my own competition; how I competed. I didn't pay attention to anything else. But there were times when I was the loser—fortunately, not too many times. I showed I was not a machine. The expectations were big, that was clear, but I also felt lot of understanding if something went wrong.

T&FN: Why do you think that javelin performances can be quite inconsistent? Do throwers try too hard, throwing off their timing?

Zelezny: It's mainly because the javelin is so technical. You need speed, coordination and to be relaxed in the throwing process. And of course the weather conditions. You can have the best possible technique, but this will not help if you have rain or too strong a wind.

T&FN: How long did it take you to establish your technique, as well as the mental understanding of technique?

Zelezny: I was always more of a technical thrower than a strong physical athlete. There was also my strong will to achieve something. I put all I had into training and the best preparation, especially with my long training stays in South Africa.

T&FN: When did you get really serious about pursuing the javelin as far as you could take it?

Zelezny: It was because of my parents. My mother was a javelin thrower and gave me a lot of encouragement. Then my father taught me how to throw.

T&FN: You enjoy fishing. What else do you like to do away from the sport?

Zelezny: For the moment, just enjoy my free time. But my phone still is ringing and I receive invitations for different functions and activities. I like to play some other sports I wasn't able or allowed to play much in the past, like tennis or soccer. I must continue to do something physical—otherwise my back will soon send me some signs.

T&FN: You have said that after retiring, you want to coach. Sometimes great athletes don't move

and '06 looked like a good one.

Twenty years at a high level; I would be 40; no gold at the Europeans was a good motivation. Maybe if the Beijing Olympics would have been a year earlier I would have considered that option. But I knew that when I said, "I will end," there would be no changes in that.

T&FN: What was the nature of the shoulder injury that bothered you in recent seasons?

Zelezny: Fortunately the arm and shoulder weren't so bad. I needed to pay more attention to my back, which I felt after every competition.

That's why I wasn't able to compete so often.

In '04, the Achilles was the problem and I underwent surgery for it in the spring of '05. This year I had a problem with a calf muscle, which is why I stopped competing after Ostrava at the end of May and came back only at the end of July in Stockholm.

T&FN: Your former coach Jan Pospisil said he felt your shoulder injury in '98 actually benefited you and led to you winning in Sydney. That injury let your tired body regenerate and also allowed you to rebuild your confidence, he said. Do you agree?

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Zelezny Interview

over to become good coaches. What assets do you feel you can bring to coaching?

Zelezny: In recent years, coaching was a theme of great interest for me. People around me knew that I mainly coached myself. The actual coaches around were more advisors.

I think I can teach young throwers good technical ability, show them how to throw and give them some of my experience after 20 years at the top level. But any coach needs to be lucky to find the right talent.

T&FN: Can areas like coaching present enough opportunities for you to devote the kind of dedication you did to the javelin?

Zelezny: Definitely. I would be more than satisfied to help coach someone to throw over 80m [262-5]. But I also see a lot of potential in women throwers. Actually, I think it's easier to achieve world-class level on the women's side.

T&FN: You were "undersized" as a thrower. Many of today's throwers are taller and heavier. Do they really need to be?

Zelezny: I think the "ideal thrower" doesn't exist. Ideal would be a muscular athlete, about 1.94 [6-4¼] in height, with the coordination and technical ability of a 1.70 [5-7] gymnast. But we know also that this combination is impossible. Yes, my technique was my strongest point—the feeling of getting the javelin to fly in the right way.

T&FN: If Uwe Hohn had been able to continue into the modern-javelin era, do you think you would still be WR holder?

Zelezny: Everything is possible. Why not?

T&FN: How far do you think you could have thrown the old model of javelin, which was more aerodynamic?

Zelezny: That's a difficult question, because I stopped throwing the old javelin when I was 19. So I really can't say because when I was in my very best shape, I never had the opportunity to try it.

But I can also say that back in '96 when I achieved my World Record, we didn't have the current carbon javelins, which are very good. I think in my shape of '96, I should have been able to achieve even a better result than with the present models. But I'm not saying it would be over 100m [328-1].

T&FN: Do you think the old-style of javelin should have been retained?

Zelezny: Because I achieved all my best throws with the new one, don't expect any other answer from me than "No."

T&FN: Which of today's young throwers has the best chance to break your WR?

Zelezny: From the current situation no one. But if they improve every year, then the chance will grow that somebody will be able to do it. And I am certain this moment will come one day.

T&FN: It often has been written that you are the greatest javelin thrower in history. How would you like to be remembered?

Zelezny: I don't like such phrases. But I must admit that in my "age" I was the best. □