

Amy Acuff

by Sieg Lindstrom

High jumper Amy Acuff earned her first World Ranking and U.S. No. 1 a decade ago, yet set her first PR (6-7) in six seasons in '03 and last summer earned her highest-ever global championships placing at the Athens Olympics, 4th.

Having married World-Ranked vaulter Tye Harvey last fall and finished a degree in Oriental Medicine and acupuncture this winter, Acuff is currently preparing at the ARCO Olympic Training Center in California. "Being in a technical event, you know, you don't really get it together until you're maybe in your early '30s," she says. "I'm 29 now and feel like this will be my best time—the next four years—for competing and achieving some really high heights."

We asked her to elaborate:

Acuff: Pretty much, my running style has really opened up and become more powerful through being more open. I'm not losing so much speed through the end of my approach.

In fact, I'm accelerating, whereas by the way that I ran I used to kind of put on the brakes at the end. And I've done a lot of work on my structure.

That's kind of a battle to keep everything together, but through old injury patterns and old scar tissue you sometimes can't get in the positions you need to get into, so I've been really working on my thoracic mobility and my hips.

T&FN: Does your expertise in Chinese medicine and acupuncture help you?

Acuff: Acupuncture's great. Through the education that I got in Chinese medicine it's been really

wonderful to learn how to see things coming from far away, rather than running into health problems and wondering why does this happen. You can really have a lot of foresight and indicators.

For example, I pay attention to how I'm

sleeping or my mood or the color of my tongue to get an overall picture of what I need more of and if I'm overtraining or I'm pretty well recharged and ready to go. I have a much better idea of how much I have in the tank.

T&FN: What is your strong suit as a jumper?

Acuff: I really rely on my nervous system and rhythm and the coordination. I'm definitely not nearly as strong as, let's say, the Olympic champion. She can probably squat maybe 20 times more than I can.

T&FN: Literally?

Acuff: Yeah. I don't do any squats and if I did, I might be able to squat maybe 40 kilos [c90lb] or something. And I'm sure she could squat 400lb [c180kg] or something.

The difference is that I can coordinate and be explosive and rely on my technique. I just don't have that raw ability to come in on my jump leg, sink down 6 inches and take off from it.

I have to have this very consistent way of running up and utilizing the forces and the timing of it, as opposed to running up and muscling over it like some high school basketball player or something.

T&FN: Have you ever done squats?

Acuff: Yeah. It's never really worked out. The more Olympic lifting I've done, the slower and the lower I jumped.

I do a lot of Swiss ball dynamic type stuff with instability. That works really well for me because I have to really prepare my nervous system to fire in those positions where I'm off-balance. That's the kind of training that really has helped me the most.

T&FN: You played high school basketball on a Texas State title team. How good were you?

Acuff: Well, I was in a dunk contest this January with Nathan Leeper, Matt Hemingway and Charles Clinger, and I got some pretty

good cheers.

T&FN: Yet you've preferred high jumping to hoops. Why?

Acuff: I think I'm probably just a little bit more introverted, and in a team sport you're limited because you may be willing to work harder and longer than your teammates, whereas in track you can just go out and go nuts and it's all on your shoulders—both the blame and the success.

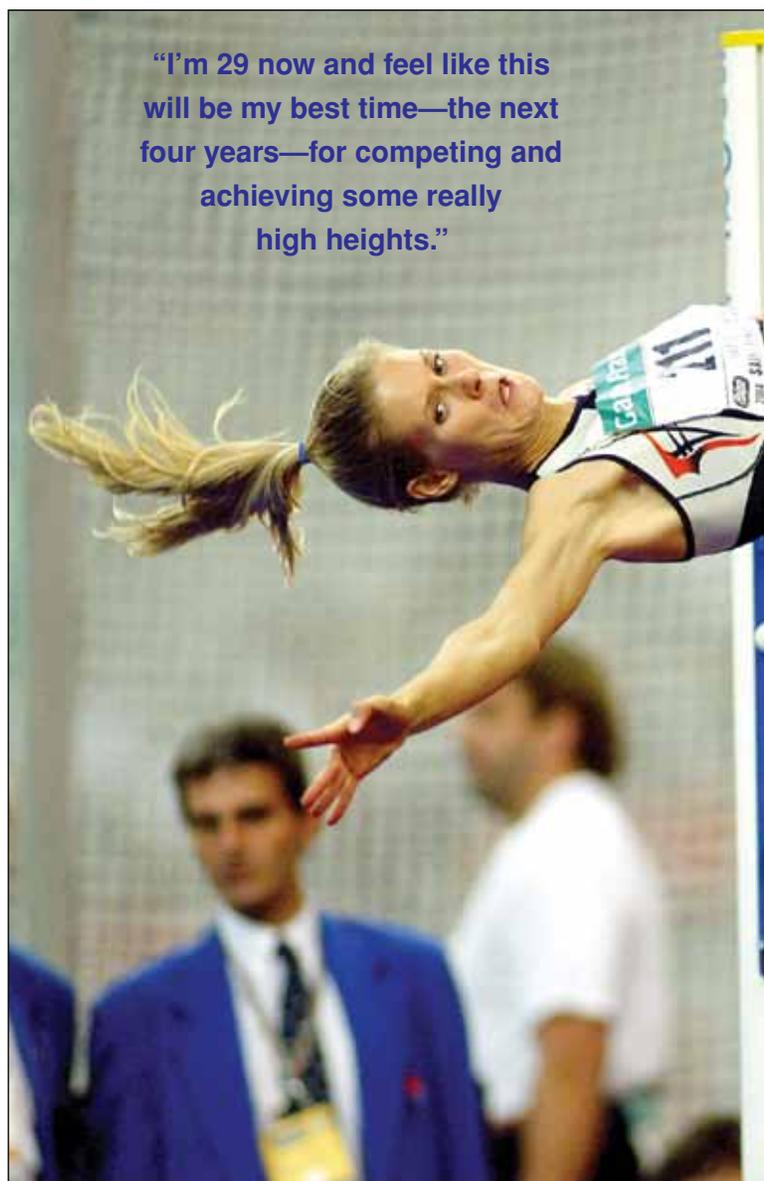
T&FN: And the financial risk and reward. You did a Playboy shoot and made the cover for their "Women of the Olympics issue" last year. Did that pay well?

Acuff: I have to say that's pretty much why I did it.

T&FN: Was it hard for a self-described introvert to pose for Playboy?

Acuff: I think the funniest thing for me is people have certain expectations of you and

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ance or whatever. I roll out of bed and I don't even comb my hair and sometimes on the track if I have allergies I just blow my nose in my t-shirt. I'm really gross and I don't care.

It's funny for me to meet certain people who didn't know me before and it's just kind of like people think there's an alternate world out there that doesn't exist.

T&FN: *Do they have an image rather than a person in mind?*

Acuff: It's almost like a product. It's something that someone else came up with. The funny thing is you have very little control of what that product ends up looking like anyway—as far as makeup and lighting. It's almost like it's not you at all. It's just someone else created a product from an idea that was once you.



T&FN: Does that bother you?

Acuff: No, it doesn't bother me. It's kind of strange sometimes, and I generally don't spend a lot of time thinking about how other

“Like A Movie I Saw Once”

T&FN: *What do you love most about track & field?*

Acuff: I think it's one of the most beautiful sports. Sometimes when I'm at the World Championships or Olympics, or even the Golden League meets, when I come back to the hotel room and see it on TV—just the action and the colors and the drama—the athletes are, I think, just the most athletic, talented people of any sport. I think it's just so great to watch.

T&FN: *And you are part of that spectacle.*

Acuff: It's strange because I don't feel really

people view me.

T&FN: *What's it like being married to another world-class athlete?*

Acuff: One reason Tye and I get along so well is I've been pretty isolated my whole life, just training and not really venturing out to do a lot of activities, and he was the opposite.

Like if he had a track meet that day, he might still go out and do some crazy activity like paragliding or kiteboarding.

So it's been kind of fun to live a little bit vicariously through him, through his activities. And he shows me new stuff.

T&FN: *What have you tried?*

Acuff: He taught me how to fly the kite for kiteboarding in Corpus Christi. I haven't got up on the board in the water yet but I was on a little land board on the sand.

T&FN: *Have you tried pole vaulting?*

Acuff: He made me try it once when we were in Arkansas at Earl Bell's place. Just from like a 4-step or something because if you back up any further than that it's really scary. If you get any kind of speed then you have to do something. You could get totally just rejected back the way you came.

T&FN: *It's a vertical jump, but very different from the high jump.*

Acuff: Very different, and vice versa. Tye tried

to high jump one day and it didn't work out too well. He couldn't clear 6ft. He was trying really hard. He was convinced he could do it, but he couldn't get that height.

close to any of those experiences. It happens so fast when you're out there and you're competing. It's almost like a movie I saw once and I wasn't really there. Sometimes I forget and I'm like, “Wow, I was really out there competing.”

If I see it later, I'm like, “How did I even do that?” The way I experience it in my body, I'm just going through this habitual rhythm that I do all the time.

But then when I see it on film or something—animated—it looks really difficult, and I think, “Gosh, I'm not sure I could ever do that again. That looks really hard.”

T&FN: *Did you clear a bar in the vault?*

Acuff: They put the cord up for me and I was able to clear 10ft so I figured I'd just stop there while I was ahead.

T&FN: *For spectators, your pass at 2.02 [6-7½] in Athens was mystifying. Had you cleared on first try, you'd have won the bronze medal.*

Acuff: I understand looking at it on paper, but with the other things factored in, I'd have made the same decision today and that's what [coach Dan Pfaff] has said too.

Part of the little inside scoop is that when I line it up and get a piece of it, it's enough for 2.04 [6-8¼], but when I don't it's a bad jump—like I could maybe clear 1.95 [6-4¾], not much higher. So I have the Jekyll & Hyde jump; it's all a question of whether I lined everything up and kept the shoulders back.

Then the other aspect of that decision was that I can't take a lot of high-level jumps, and that 1.99 [6-6] was a monster effort out of me. That's really high neurological effort.

Also when it's down to that few jumpers, let's say I did PR on my first attempt to clear 2.02, I get the bronze but there's no way I would have good jumps at 2.04. My legs would have been wasted.

It was a gamble to get a better medal than a bronze. I really didn't expect that that Russian [Yelena Slesarenko] was going to be almost clearing the World Record.

T&FN: *Do you think you could jump that high [6-9/2.06]?*

Acuff: Yeah, I do, actually, but it's going to take some technical improvements.

T&FN: *What's the best competition you've ever had?*

Acuff: I'd have to say the Olympics in Athens were my best competition ever: to stay calm through 1.99 in the face of being in the Olympic Games.

That's part of the problem, why I haven't jumped higher heights—that once you clear 1.99–2.01, then the bar goes up to something really exciting like 2.03, 2.04, and then you start thinking, “OK, I've got to try harder,” you get too excited and then you kind of blow it.

Whereas if you would just execute the same kind of jumps that you did before it would work out. But then also you have the fatigue thing setting in. So it's kind of a delicate balance.

But I'm working on it and I have strategies for that, so I'm going to play around with that this summer and get a PR. □