

## T&FN INTERVIEW

# Ashton Eaton

Ashton Eaton has been on a roll this year. First, he followed up his December graduation from Oregon (psychology degree) with a spate of event PRs indoors that led to a triathlon win at Millrose—over the likes of Bryan Clay, Trey Hardee, Jake Arnold and Curtis Beach.

Then he scored a resounding 6568 to up his own heptathlon World Record in Estonia.

In his first outdoor appearance, and with mom Roslyn in the stands watching him, Eaton extended his javelin PR by nearly 9 feet—on his only throw. Clearly, in his first pro season, the career of last year's Bowerman Award winner is on the ascent:

**T&FN:** You opened with a 185-8 (56.59) javelin PR. It's just one event, but was that an encouraging way to start '11 outdoors?

**Eaton:** It was awesome, actually. Javelin has

been an event I struggled with all of my career. My old PR [176-11/53.93] was from my soph year when I won NAAs the first time.

Even with that mark, I PR'd by about 30 feet just because it was a clutch type of thing and I had to do that to win. But, it's tough having a PR from back in my soph year.

**T&FN:** You said after your second heptathlon WR that you hadn't thought about comparing

the Tallinn 6568 with your first record, the 6499 from last year's NCAA Indoor. Have you thought about that, or is it a "that's in the past" sort of thing?

**Eaton:** Yeah, I think it's a past thing. It was just something I wanted to do indoors to kind of establish where I was. Obviously, it was a really good start to a pro career. I was just using that to set up my outdoor season.

I feel like I can kind of lay low this outdoor season. Say I hadn't done anything indoors, people might have said, "Where's Ashton Eaton? He's a pro now and should be doing stuff."

But since I did indoors and got the World Record, people know I'm out there training and I can just lay low until outdoor season

really starts.

**T&FN:** And world guys like Roman Šebrle, who was in Tallinn, definitely know you're out there training. How, in fact, have you benefited from having top-class Americans in the event?

**Eaton:** It's a huge benefit because you have to push yourself. My ultimate goals are the Olympics and the World Championships, besides just bettering my performances. But to just get to those meets and being an American, it's really tough.

We have so many good guys and only three make a team, so it's a good competitive atmosphere. It may not be as tough in some other countries to get a qualifying standard. But the standards in the U.S. are pretty high. So there is pressure at those types of events—but it's good pressure because it pushes people to better scores.

**T&FN:** How did you benefit from competing at the '09 Worlds in Berlin?

**Eaton:** I don't think it was so much the marks or the competition, but rather seeing how the European system works. The length of the days in the multi and that you have to be pretty much ready for anything. It's not like we do over here.

Like, there isn't a set half-hour between each event, like we might do in the States. I've already looked at the Daegu Worlds schedule and there is a 7-hour break between the shot and the high jump. It was the same in Berlin: a 4-hour break between those events.

So we had to manage our bodies better. You just always have to be ready.

**T&FN:** Going back a ways, were you a 400/long jump type of guy in high school?

**Eaton:** I was more of a 100/200 guy; I didn't do the 400 until my senior year. Actually, I did some 4x4s but nothing open. And long jump, of course. My PRs were 10.84, 21.6 and 23-11 $\frac{3}{4}$  [7.31].

by Jon Hendershott



### Eaton In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Ashton James Eaton was born January 21, 1988, in Portland, Oregon; 6-1/180 (1.83/82)

•**Schools:** Mountain View HS (Bend, Oregon) '06; Oregon '10; now represents Nike Elite TC

•**PRs:** Decathlon—8457 '10. HeptIn—6568 WR '11 (see box for individual events)

•**Coaches:** Tate Metcalf (HS); Kelly Blair-LaBounty, Dan Steele, Harry Marra (Oregon); Marra (pro)

•**Major Meets:** LJ—2)USJ, 11) PAJr '07, Dec—3)USJr '07; 1) NC, 5)OT '08; 1)NC, 2)US, 18) WC '09; 1)NC '10. Hept In—6) NCI '08; 1)NCi '09; 1)NCi '10

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** '08—x, 4; '09—x, 3; '10—2, 1.

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**T&FN:** Who first directed you toward the decathlon?

**Eaton:** It was my high school coach, Tate Metcalf. He is a great guy and we’re still really good friends. It was a funny thing because in my soph year, he decided, “This kid has potential.”

He would always bring *T&FN* to track practice. He asked if I had ever seen it and I said I hadn’t. He said, “They talk about all the best athletes in the nation and in the back is a section with all the best high school marks of the year.”

I looked through it and said, “I can do some of these,” and he said, “Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, too.” So it became not a game but a really big goal because *T&FN* was a really big deal and a lot of the high school kids in it got recruited. I jumped a windy 24-1 [7.34] as a senior and I finally got in *T&FN* [November ‘06 edition]. I was like, “Oh, awesome!” It was pretty sweet.

In the spring of my senior year, it was close to recruiting season and Tate asked me, “Ashton, have you ever heard of the decathlon?” I said no and he said it was an event where you do five events each day, over two days.

I asked what the events were and he told me and I thought that sounded good. Then that was that; it was about a minute-and-a-half conversation and then we continued practice.

But I also started messing around with a few of the events. I threw a little jav, threw the disc once or twice, threw the shot some in practice. Over the summer, I played with hurdles. But I had never pole vaulted before.

**T&FN:** So how did you end up at Oregon?

**Eaton:** Tate had contacted coaches at Boise State, Washington State and Oregon. They all wanted to know my marks: “What does he high jump, or vault or throw the shot?” And Tate had to answer, “Well, he hasn’t done that one, or that one, or that one either. But he probably could do them really well.”

They were like, “Well, I don’t know.” I visited Washington State and they were pretty interested. I talked with Rick Sloan [a ‘68 decathlon Olympian]. He’s a good guy; really funny. We’re good friends.

Then [Oregon coach] Dan Steele came to a meet where I was long jumping. He told the coaches, “I like this kid; let’s recruit him.” So I took a trip to Oregon and I chose UO.

**T&FN:** When would you say you

“became” a decathlete? When did you fully embrace the event?

**Eaton:** I would say it was Pac-10s my freshman year [‘07]. I had done only one multi before that, at the Jim Click Shootout in Arizona and I scored 6997. I won and Harry [Marra] actually was at that meet since he was coaching Paul Terek at the time.

Pac-10s came around and I got 2<sup>nd</sup>. I had to run the fastest 1500 up to then and it was only my second one. I ran 4:58 at the Arizona meet but in the Pac-10 I ran 4:39. That was huge for me because I was dying in the heat. I ended up getting 2<sup>nd</sup> behind Jake Arnold and I scored 7123. I really had to step it up.

**T&FN:** Was there one thing, or a group of things, about the whole experience that really captivated you?

**Eaton:** I think it just fits my personality. When I go to practice, there are a lot of different things to do.

I try to master them all. I don’t like being bad at something and the decathlon is really tough.

I used to be able to pick up things overnight. But it just doesn’t work that way with the dec; there is always a challenge. Even the greatest mathematicians, like Einstein, wanted to challenge themselves. It’s the same thing with the multis.

**T&FN:** Many decathletes have said that the object isn’t to beat another competitor, but to better yourself. What do you think of that?

**Eaton:** I agree totally. Almost every meet, I go out and try to do a PR in every event. I’m up for the 100 and I think, “OK, today I’m going to run faster than I ever have.” Same with each event. So it definitely is against yourself. You can have other competitors there to push you, but you’re always competing first against yourself.

**T&FN:** You said something very interesting about the Tallinn heptathlon that also pertains to you in a decathlon: “I try to be a spectator in my own body. I just try to sit back and watch what happens.” Can you explain just how you do that?

**Eaton:** Honestly, I’m not quite sure. By the time the meet comes around, the practical preparations are already over. You’re not going to learn or change anything during the meet. If anything, you’ll revert back to old ways. So you just have to kind of let the training take over and do what a coach does during a meet: sit back and watch what develops and make adjustments. It’s kind of the same thing for myself.

**T&FN:** Is that desire to continually challenge yourself a trait that makes you especially well-suited for the decathlon? Or track in general?

**Eaton:** I don’t know. There’s probably a ton

### **Eaton’s PRs**

**Ashton Eaton’s decathlon event PRs add up to 9004:**

100.....	10.33	(‘10)
LJ.....	26-4½/8.04	(‘10)
SP.....	47-5/14.45i	(‘11)
HJ.....	6-11/2.11i	(‘10)
400.....	46.28	(‘10)
<b>First-day total 4743</b>		
110H.....	13.54	(‘10)
DT.....	143-5/43.71	(‘10)
PV.....	17-3/5.26i	(‘10)
JT.....	185-8/56.59	(‘11)
1500.....	4:20.56	(‘10)
<b>Second-day total 4261</b>		

## Eaton Interview

of psychology that goes into the sport—and then 10 times as much for the decathlon. I think there is a certain personality type that fits the decathlon, but I'm not sure what it is. I can't take away from the other events. I mean, I'm super-competitive in anything I do. Somebody might say, "You can't do that as fast as I can" and I'll say, "You bet I can."

**T&FN:** *So is the decathlon the perfect outlet for that competitive streak?*

**Eaton:** I definitely think so, because if you run the 100, that's all you do. You get ready for that one race and you know in your mind, "After I run this race, I'm done. So I have to maximize my competitive opportunity."

In the decathlon, you can think, "I'm going to do this 100 faster than I ever have before"—then you think just like that nine more times. So I definitely think the decathlon captures the competitive nature in people.

**T&FN:** *Is it like flipping a switch, or is it just inherent in the decathlon? You know what you're going to go after in the next event?*

**Eaton:** For me personally in a decathlon, there is no off switch. I think that's why a decathlete can be so disappointed when he doesn't do what he wants, like set a PR or whatever. So now that I'm talking it out, I realize the decathlon is for people who are super-competitive. They're either really tough or really stupid. When they are defeated, they keep coming back for more.

Like a decathlete doesn't do what he wants in the 100, but right away he thinks, "Alright, get it back in the long jump!" And if he doesn't

do well in the long jump, he thinks, "Get it back in the shot!" Maybe decathletes are just mental masochists.

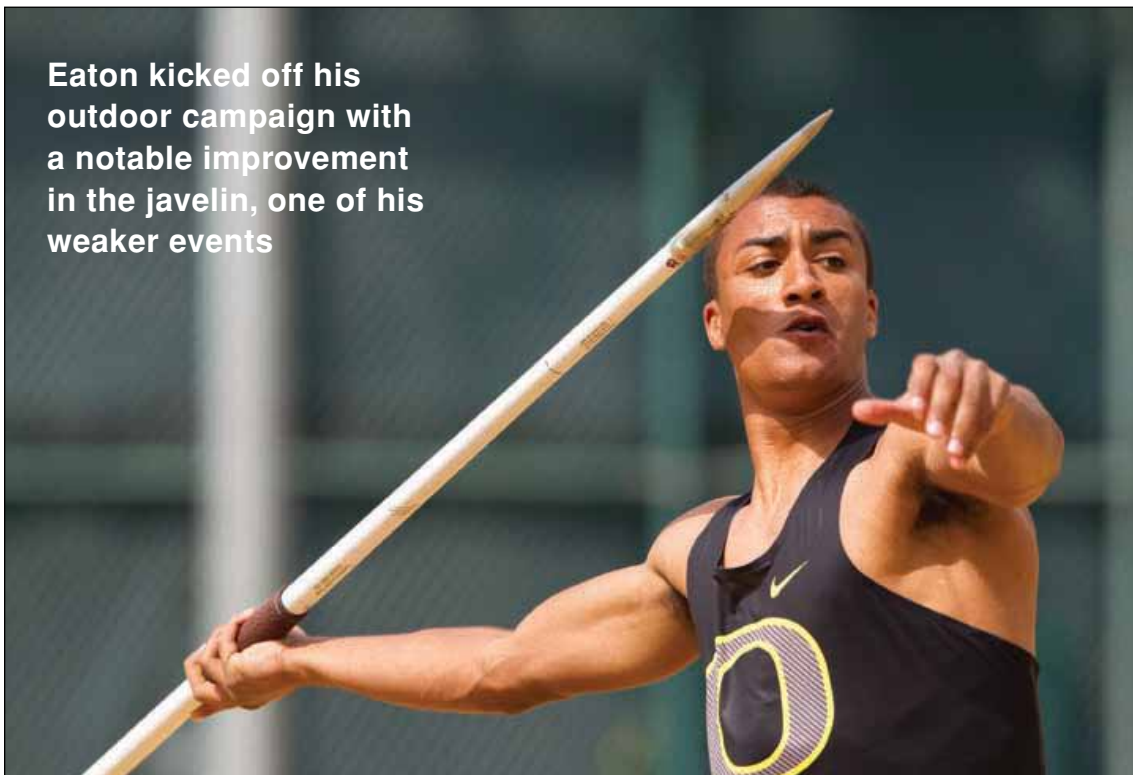
**T&FN:** *Do you have a favorite event, as well as least favorite, among the decathlon events?*

**Eaton:** I'm really liking the hurdles. I've really grown there, improving my times. I don't really have a least favorite anymore. It's like

*closed last year at home to win your third NCAA decathlon title. What was the most satisfying performance of your college career?*

**Eaton:** To me, the performance that best encapsulated all that I went through in college was the 1500 in that last NCAA dec. After I finished that race, I remembered back through all of the workouts that we had on the track with

### Eaton kicked off his outdoor campaign with a notable improvement in the javelin, one of his weaker events



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trying to decide which one of 10 fashion models is your least favorite to look at. I don't know; they all look good to me. [laughs]

All the events are different. It's like they each have a different personality. Each event has a different story behind it. Like the 100, I'm just naturally good at it. But then in the discus, there's nine years of practicing in it. You have different experiences there than you do in, say, the long jump. Each event is like a different person.

**T&FN:** *You had a great college career, which you*

*my teammates and buddies. All the times the team would get together and go to the lake, or go play sand volleyball, or go watch a movie.*

Those things are really what college track is all about. Not so much the performances, but all the stuff that goes into it. All the things that you learn with and from your teammates.

**T&FN:** *With [two-time NCAA heptathlon champion] Brienne Theisen being your girlfriend and you both competing in multis, is that a unique bond between you because you both know what the other is going through?*

**Eaton:** Yes. It's a pretty fair deal because she understands me and I also know what she is talking about. I can say things to her, so it's good. What I think is really nice is that we both know when we get tired of it also. Like, "OK, time to not talk about track anymore."

**T&FN:** *The decathlon is such an all-around test of the sport. Until people have tried it in competition, it's hard for them to really grasp the difficulty of it. In fact, have you ever thought about an "ultimate" score you'd like to get? Or is it still just about continually challenging yourself?*

**Eaton:** I've never thought about an ultimate score. It is just the challenge to keep trying to get better in every event. Doing that means the scores will come. They always do. □

### World's Greatest Athlete?

Sportswriters have long labeled the Olympic decathlon champion as the "world's greatest athlete." Ashton Eaton's thoughts on that idea:

"I definitely think any decathlete is a well-rounded athlete. To be the Olympic champion, you have to have some pretty impressive marks in a lot of the events. Someone once said that a decathlete has to have the talent to make it to the semi-finals in almost every [Games] event.

"It's difficult to say but I do feel that if you took a decathlete like Trey Hardee, who is fairly tall [6-5/1.96] and very athletic, and put him on the basketball court with LeBron James, Trey probably could shoot and he's fast enough to be

able to hold his own. He probably could play pretty good defense.

"But if you put LeBron in the decathlon, what could he do in so many different events? Could he vault and hurdle and throw the javelin and high jump? It's hard to say."

And while he is a track fan in general, Eaton admits, "I'm still learning some of the decathlon's history. No disrespect to the other competitors, but I've never really tried to read about the past. I have met some of the former greats and they're all good guys.

"But I haven't pursued getting a total understanding of the history. I really don't know why. [laughs] Maybe it would be just too much track."