



T&FN INTERVIEW

# Ashton Eaton

by Jon Hendershott

**“The best mental approach that I’ve found so far is to tell yourself to really try as hard as you can to win, or set a PR, or jump or throw far... then expect that you won’t”**

**W**in or lose, Ashton Eaton loves the decathlon. His respect for his fellow 10-eventers knows no bounds. And the 28-year-old Oregon native is the unquestioned highest scorer that the all-around test has ever seen.

Twice a World Record setter; the '12 Olympic champion; Worlds victor in '13 and '15; last year's AOY. Not to forget two World Indoor heptathlon titles and three 7-event WRs. Eaton has done it all.

Yet each season brings something new. He and coach Harry Marra begin the Olympic campaign in a place that's new for them both: as the defender. That's where we began our conversation:

**T&FN:** You are vastly more experienced at this point than you were at the start of the '12 Olympic season. So have your and Harry's preparations been that much different this year, or are they pretty much what you always have done?

**Eaton:** I would say that physically, it's pretty much what we always have done. But mentally it's been different. And those are the very two aspects of the sport that are the most important: you have to be ready both physically

and mentally.

Mentally it's more an unknown territory, in the sense that I've never been an Olympic defender before this. I'm not really sure what that looks like, or sounds like, or feels like.

So, I think it's good. It's something new. Of course, I can go to Worlds and it's the feeling that "I've been here before and handled it." And I've handled it well.

But the Olympics are different. People tend to think that something big is going to happen. Or athletes will make their breakthrough, trying to time it for the Games. So I think the Olympics just keeps you a little on edge because you never know what's going to happen.

But physically, nothing has changed for me. And mentally, it's just, "Stick to your guns; don't do anything crazy. Prepare in case somebody else does something crazy." I think I have to be a little more on the "defensive-thought" front.

I have to prepare myself for things to happen. Where in '12, it was more an offensive-thought frame of mind, in that I was the one

who wanted to do things.

**T&FN:** Do you try to keep on blinders during a competition, or do you take note of what others do? Or do you just concentrate on what you and Harry want you to do and nothing else matters?

**Eaton:** I would say I do notice what others do, because at the heart of all this, I'm a competitor. What I do is that I'm really good at responding to other people's performances.

If we're all just kind of steady-as-she-goes, doing the things we have all done before as far as marks go, I think that's what I do. It's what we all do. But when somebody does something unexpected or has a great PR, then everybody gets fired up. Like, "We need to wake up and start doing that ourselves."

That's why competition with the multis athletes is great: those things do fire us up. They fire me up to respond. It's like, "OK, now we've got something going here."

**T&FN:** You set your two World Records in very important meets: 9039 to win the '12 Trials and then 9045 last year to defend your world title. Do those highly-important competitive settings have

any special effect on you, or do you just try to get the very best out of yourself in all 10 events?

**Eaton:** I think it's a combination. I try to do the best I can anyway, but I find that competitiveness brings out my best. Harry is really good at physically preparing us, so I'm prepared to do something like 9000 points. In '12, it was just the competitiveness of wanting to be an Olympian. That's really all I wanted.

I didn't necessarily care about winning the Trials; I just thought, "I'm going to compete and give myself the best chance possible to be an Olympian." That ended up as the record.

**T&FN:** Is there ever an "ideal" decathlon?

**Eaton:** No, I don't think so. I just think that's the way life is: something is always going to go wrong and not be the way you want. Yet that's what keeps me coming back. The next time, try to make it better than the one before. I think that's how you deal with it.

**T&FN:** In both your records, you knew what you had to run in the 1500. Do you recall any thoughts you had as you lined up for those races?

**Eaton:** Actually, I feel more nervous now just thinking about it! Oh my gosh [groans]. The options are that you're a person who does it... or you're one who doesn't. And if you're trying hard enough, it's always going to be close at the end of a decathlon [laughs].

You just tell yourself to be tough. What it really comes down to is, if it wasn't painful, it would be no problem, no challenge. What happens is, it's painful and you tell yourself that you don't want to feel any more pain. That makes you slow down, or not go out as hard or whatever. So you just fight with yourself: "Be tough. You can do it."

In Beijing, I thought, "You'll be in pain for 4:17 but you'll break the World Record again." So it was worth it. Sure, I would keep the world championship but the bottom line was that I

## Eaton In A Nutshell

- **Personal:** Ashton James Eaton was born January 21, 1988, in Portland, Oregon; 6-1/190 (1.83/86)
- **PRs:** Dec—9045 WR '15. (see sidebar for decathlon bests.) Hept—6645 WR '12; 400H—48.69 '14
- **Schools:** Mountain View HS (Bend, Oregon) '06; Oregon '10; now represents Nike Elite TC
- **Coaches:** Tate Metcalf (HS); Kelly Blair-LaBounty, Dan Steele, Harry Marra (Oregon); Marra (pro)
- **Major Meets:** Dec—3)USJr '07; 1)NC, 5)OT '08; 1)NC, 2)US, 18)WC '09; 1)NC '10; 1)US, 2)WC '11; 1)OT, 1)OG '12; 1)US, 1)WC '13; 1)WC '15. Hept—6)NCi '08; 1)NCi '09; 1)NCi '10; 1)WCI '12; 1)WCI '14
- **World/U.S. Rankings:** x/4 '08; x/3 '09; 2/1 '10; 2/2 '11; 1/1 '12; 1/1, '13; 1/1 '15 (AOY)

## An Impressive Set Of PRs

Ashton Eaton's lifetime bests in each of the decathlon events add up to a whopping score of 9549, but he still trails Dan O'Brien's 9572 by 23 points as the year begins.

Eaton's bests, as they play out in deca event-order: 100—10.19w, LJ—27-0 (8.23), SP—50-6¼ (15.40), HJ—6-11 (2.11), 400—45.00, 110H—13.34w, DT—155-4 (47.36), PV—17-8½ (5.40), JT—218-8 (66.64) 218-8 (66.64), 1500—4:14.48.

6 of those marks were made in multi-event competition. His deca-PRs in the other 4: SP—49-3½ (15.02), 110H—13.52, PV—17-4½ (5.30), JT—212-8 (64.83).

wanted to set a PR score again.

**T&FN:** What factors do you think help a decathlete compile his highest score possible over the two days? Is it the combination of that mental approach plus having nothing physically bad happen, like Trey's leg injury in Beijing?

**Eaton:** I would say that the biggest factors are being healthy—if you can be 100% healthy, that's the best. Then the best mental approach that I've found so far is to tell yourself to really try as hard as you can to win, or set a PR, or jump or throw far... then expect that you won't.

What I think that does is put you in a mental state of, first, doing the very best you can, which is all anyone can ask for. But you also don't set expectations that make you get down on yourself. That's probably one of the worst things you can do.

So you have to tell yourself, "I'm going to try as hard as I can to jump 8-meters [26-3]—but the reality is, I probably won't." So if you don't, you don't sulk; you just move on to the next event. Yet you still try to do your very best. That's all you can do. You just try to get maximum physical output with the least mental damage.

But I don't tell myself, "If I don't PR today, I'm going to be ticked off," or "If I don't jump a certain height, then I'll feel, 'Crap!'" But if I was competitive and I tried, then that's what I got and I move on to the next thing.

**T&FN:** You have said that in the '11 Worlds, you fought with yourself mentally.

**Eaton:** In Daegu, I did really poorly in several events, so by the time of the javelin, I thought, "This meet is over. Forget it." I felt like I had lost it all and I told myself—I think for the first time ever—I wished I wasn't there and I wanted to go home. Later I thought, "What the hell was that?"

So I have experienced being down on myself but I also have told myself, "That's the worst position you can ever be in." So I determined to do whatever I could to never be in that place again.

**T&FN:** The camaraderie among the multi-event athletes, men and women, now is part of the fabric of the event. Has that feeling of "we're all in this together" always been a big motivator for you?

**Eaton:** It's always been one of my

favorite parts about the event. Having done so many other sports growing up, and single events in track, that feeling just has been one of the best parts of it.

You always finish the competition—whether you or anybody else did good or bad—feeling good. You have participated in battle with those guys. Just to finish is cause for celebration, especially at a big one like the Worlds or Olympics.

You can go home and reflect later, "Yeah, I stunk up that competition. I did bad." But you can't really ruin that moment of having completed the thing; doing a victory lap and knowing that those times and experiences are numbered.

Like Trey and me going 1-2 in London was awesome. For us to be on the podium in London, and Trey having come back from his elbow injury the year before, just made London so great.

**T&FN:** Did that sense of brotherhood with the other decathletes grow in you as you matured?

**Eaton:** That's a good question. I do think I always felt it, but maybe in my first few decathlons I didn't know why it was important. My first decathlon was very small, with miserable weather. Nobody took a victory lap—because nobody was there watching [laughs].

But I did learn there is a lot of time to sit around and chat with the other guys, or when you're warming up for an event. My next one was the ['07] Pac-10 at Stanford and I remember the coaches always were friendly. Some coaches would ask another for help: "Hey, can you catch my guy's mark?" "Yeah, no problem." That all was different from the things I had done.

So I don't think I ever had to "grow into it," as far as being accepted. But to understand it more, I just had to learn about it. All that comes with experience.

**T&FN:** You can reasonably expect to go into Rio

## A Multi-Talented Pair

Even well before their marriage in mid-summer of '13, Ashton Eaton and Canadian heptathlete Brienne Theisen found love and shared success as collegians at Oregon. She won 6 NCAA titles and he took 6. Now as Theisen-Eaton, the 27-year-old Brienne has earned 3 Worlds silvers (2 outdoors, 1 indoors). They have been at each other's side throughout, sharing hopes and goals and just the entire journey.

"You don't really know what you have until you don't have it," says Eaton. "I'll bet that this question could be more appropriately answered, emotionally and accurately, some years down the line.

"But for this moment now, I would say—just looking back on the things we have already done—it has been just awesome. Being able to travel to so many places together...doing track...we're athletes... we're inspiring people by doing what we love... It's really been incredible.

"The last 10 years we will look back on—not too long from now, I'm sure—and wish we could go back to the very beginning and do it all again."

with a major edge in PRs, so have you and Harry talked about the aim for the Games? Is it just to defend or is to go "all-out" for another record?

**Eaton:** One big goal I have always had going into any competition, and especially a major meet like the Games, is just to win. If it turns out that the World Record is there, then I try to go for it at the end. So I take that approach.

But going into Rio, it's going to be—assuming I make the damn thing! [laughs]—to try to win and I feel I can do that by making the fewest mistakes. It will help just knowing that somebody else is the one who has to gain points, just as long as I don't lose any. You just have to test yourself and the best way to do that is to having somebody else there pushing you.

Right now, with all events being pretty average overall and even with a few mistakes here and there, I should be at least in the 8900 range in Rio. So far, that's several hundred points above what most of the other guys have scored. To move up, they will have to do something they have never done before.

**T&FN:** You stayed away from the decathlon in '14, running the 400 hurdles. You later said that training helped you in both the 400 and 1500. How else did hurdle training help?

**Eaton:** The big thing it did was really help me want to be back and do the decathlon. I didn't get to do the '15 Götzis for the first time and that was really disappointing. I was so excited to be there since I hadn't done a decathlon in a couple of years and I was in the place with such a great decathlon culture.

So when I got to Beijing I thought, "Just get me into the blocks for the 100." I didn't really care what happened; I just wanted to start a decathlon and participate for even a little bit. Once I walked down the tunnel from the

call room and I knew I was going to start the decathlon, that's when I realized what the year away did—it made me really want to be there and appreciate doing another one.

That's a really good feeling to have, especially going into an event that you know is going to be physically and mentally tough: the wanting to do it. Sometimes you're not sure

**Eaton:** It definitely is. You just have to tailor training to the type of athlete you're dealing with. Harry does that really well with Brienne and me. In the weight room, I just can't lift a bunch of super-heavy weights in Olympic-type lifting. I have to do auxiliary-type stuff, to get my joints stronger and that kind of thing. My muscles have always had strength, even when

KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT



Eaton & Hardee have won a lot of big medals together

if you want to do a decathlon; you're nervous and you don't think you're tough. But I realized that getting away from it was exactly what I needed. It made me want to come back and do it.

**T&FN:** As coach and athlete, how do you and Harry balance between getting stronger to improve in the throws while keeping your 10.21 speed and 8.20 spring? That must be one of the toughest balancing acts in decathlon training.

I was little. But I never lifted weights when I was young.

So I have the spring and the speed for running and jumping. Then you balance that with knowing, "A little bit of strength will help me throw far, but also know that my technique is bad. So improving my technique will also help me throw farther." Rather than just get big and strong, improve the technique first and see what you can do.

**T&FN:** Looking way ahead, you now have the automatic pass to the '17 Worlds in London, where you won your Olympic title. Have you even thought about that, or is this year all-Olympics?

**Eaton:** My view right now is just focusing to make it to Rio. It's just the nature of the Olympics: everybody makes it so big and there is so much history. So getting there and focusing on winning a medal is everything right now. To consider anything else reduces the importance and magnitude of the Games.

**T&FN:** And you still have the World Indoor and the Trials even before Rio. So take it one championship at a time?

**Eaton:** Yes. The World Indoors and Trials are stepping stones to get to the ultimate prize. Make sure you step firmly on those stones—[laughs] and don't fall in! □

## Hardee A Friend & Rival

Perhaps there is no better example of the camaraderie shared by decathletes than that between Ashton Eaton and rival/friend Trey Hardee. Each has won two global titles, World Ranked No. 1 three times and they placed 1-2 at the London Games.

There is enormous respect and admiration between them.

"It has been extremely helpful and I think 'comforting' is the right word," Eaton explains. "He is older than I am, of course [32], so he has been through many things. Especially when I was younger; like in '09 at my first Worlds and his first win. Then the '11 Worlds [another 1-2 as Hardee defended] and the '12 Trials. All those times, I remember him really helping me.

"When you're in a foreign country like Korea at Daegu in '11, you're there for a couple of weeks.

To see someone walking around confident, knowing what to do, knowing how to focus on the job ahead. Go to practice and don't worry about any weird stuff that might happen. All that helps, especially when someone other than your coach tells you something or you see what a teammate like Trey does.

"So, it's just been extremely beneficial. I struggled a lot in Daegu and Trey said, 'Look, I no-heighted at the Olympics. This latest glitch is nothing; you're still in this for a medal. C'mon, we need to go 1-2.'

"In those situations, he always was the more confident one and was so supportive. So it's really been awesome.

"For at the past two Worlds, he got injured and there wasn't anything I could do. That was just the worst feeling. I always want Trey to be there and complete the decathlon, to medal and score well."