

BEN PLUCKNETT

Ben Plucknett's career went from rags to riches, then back to rags. Now he is working to regain the riches once more.

As a Missouri senior, he finished 7th in the 1976 Olympic Trials discus. Three seasons later, he had improved to 216-11. In 1980, his 3rd at the Trials kept venerable Al Oerter off his 5th Olympic team. But 1981 was Ben Plucknett's year.

On a warm May day in Modesto, Plucknett broke the World Record with 233-7. He won the TAC and in July lengthened the record to 237-4 in Stockholm, still the longest discus throw in history.

But he doesn't hold the World Record as he was banned from competition for 18 months shortly thereafter when the IAAF reported he had tested positively for steroids at a winter meet in Australia. Stunned, Plucknett tried to fight his suspension in the courts, with his lawyers citing what they called many instances of inconsistency in the process as it had been applied to Ben. It was to no avail.

His return in '82 was cut short by injury. Last season, he reached beyond 230 feet in an unprecedented three consecutive meets. He made the World Championships team, but tore a muscle near his right shoulder in the East German meet. Injury once more ended his season.

Plucknett has been intently preparing for the Olympic season ahead—despite recurring trouble with the pectoral injury. And a recent case of the flu left him weakened, if it is possible to weaken a bear of a man who stands 6-7 and weighs more than 300lb during the competitive season.

He is soft-voiced, but simmering just below his gentle exterior is an intensity and fierceness that is formidable—and subtly frightening. Plucknett's feelings and opinions run deep, but only recently has he opened up to the press following a self-imposed silence dating back to 1981.

He says he controlled his anger by finally facing the fact of the ban and then getting on with life. So he is talking publicly again, and you get the feeling it is partially because he loves his sport and wants the intricacies of it—which greatly affect all athletes and how they perform—to be clearly understood by people. Plucknett wants to do all he can to aid in that understanding:

T&FN: You made the 1973 U.S. Junior team, the first to tour Europe. Then you said your main goal was just to win the Big 8 discus. That must seem like ages ago, but was there ever a time when you drastically reassessed your goals? Or has all that happened in your career recently just been a gradual evolution?

Plucknett: None of it has been a gradual evolution. I go in cycles. I come from the Midwest, so I'm very conservative. And in my training, even though I've been out here in California for eight years, I'm still very conservative. My goals were conservative up to a certain point. That point changed after Modesto in 1981, when the first American Record was set.

When I was growing up, I was told that when you are throwing beyond 200



Rich Clarkson

feet, once the discus gets past about 160 feet, it actually flies on its own. There is no power left in the throw from your actual throwing effort.

I realized that after 230 feet, everything is just numbers, the abstract ideas that people put on it. From 230 feet to 240 is just a couple of minor things that will happen to be right that particular day.

Of course, you have to have the competition there on that day. Otherwise, you probably won't get those one or two flaws out of your technique. Or you might not have any flaws, but you might not be 100% accurate on your technique that day.

T&FN: *Competition, then, is a real key for you?*

Plucknett: It's everything for me. At least that's what my record shows. I only throw far and throw well when I have competition.

T&FN: *You have been quoted that when you are on, you feel you are unbeatable.*

Plucknett: Yes, I do. I don't believe there is anyone who can beat me. Well, let me rephrase that: when I'm "on," I throw as well as anyone else but with the extra advantage for me of the way I compete under pressure.

Even if I'm really off in a particular competition, I feel I should never throw less than 3rd-place. If everybody else is on but I'm off, I still should be able to call up enough reserves to get at least into the first three places.

T&FN: *What does being the longest discus thrower in history mean to you?*

Plucknett: That idea means nothing to me. It does mean that I'm 6-7, I'm taller than most other throwers and I weigh more than most throwers. So, potentially for my height and weight and angles of levers, I should throw a certain distance. By accomplishing that, I would become the longest discus thrower in the world.

Another thing is the idea that Ben Plucknett didn't crumble under pressure. He tried to reach his potential even after everything else that happened to him.

T&FN: *Is it more important that you prove to people you can bear up under the tremendous weight that was put on you, rather than throw 240, which you have said in the past you would like to reach?*

Plucknett: Well, 240 is very realistic now, so I'm looking more towards 75m [246-1]. Even though I haven't thrown 240 competitively, or even 238, I feel that potentially I can now throw 75m.

T&FN: *In wanting to show you have been able to handle all that has happened to you, has overcoming the memory of the ban become a prime motivating force?*

Plucknett: I can't say it isn't. It's a motivator on some days. Against certain athletes, or in a meet put on by a certain promoter, it is a motivating force. At other times it isn't. Then I'm motivated by the actual competing under pressure.

I see this year not as me versus the other American throwers, but as East versus West in an Olympic year. It's East versus West in athletic programs, politics, government, everything. It's all tied in.

Unfortunately, there are four main discus throwers fighting for three spots on the team—and no one is certain to get a place. I wish all the throwers good luck this year because I would like to see all three Olympic medals go to throwers from the Free World.

T&FN: *How has your outlook toward this sport changed, in general and prior to 1981?*

Plucknett: Prior to '81, this sport was just for fun because I wasn't a contender. You could go out to any meet and have a good time. You could throw a good throw or a bad throw and not worry about the ratings. You didn't worry about what people think of you having a bad day. Now when you are a contender, you have to throw respectfully every meet.

So, on the way to being a contender you lose friends. You can't go to a meet and compete and have fun. If you want to have fun, you go to a meet as a spectator.

In the future, the sport for me will take on a form like the middle distance runners use. In the past, I threw in 25-30 meets a year. Next year, I probably will throw only 2-3 meets in the U.S., including the nationals. Then I will go to Europe and pick 5 to 10 meets which are very important there and then I will train for the World Cup.

I will have no choice about it. If I am to represent the U.S. in the future, and represent myself as a premier discus thrower, I must choose my meets very carefully. In doing that, I expect to make a lot of people angry because I won't be throwing in their meets. But I have to watch out for myself from here on.

T&FN: *You said once that you felt you had changed as a person in your quest to reach the top, but you didn't like some of those changes. Could you have done it any other way, or is the quest to reach the top so intense that an athlete is going to change whether he wants to or not?*

Plucknett: It will force an athlete to change even if he doesn't want to. But there aren't many different ways you can reach the top. If there were, there would be a lot of athletes reaching the very top in their event or sport.

I sit back now and wonder sometimes why certain people don't reach the top. Some of it is hereditary; some of it is training and being able or unable to change training methods as the athlete changes; some of it is changed priorities as they get older.

T&FN: *It seems that once you get to the top, things get more complicated. Would you rather be the underdog, the darkhorse of 1980, rather than the major*

contender you are in 1984?

Plucknett: I always was the underdog, in everything I did, up to '81. Of course, I would still like to be the person who comes out of the woodwork and captures it all. There is something special about that. But being my size and weight, you can't always have what you want.

If you want the glory, you have to put up with the pressure along with it. When I'm depressed I remember being told by a coach that hundreds of athletes would trade places with me, just to have the chance to go through what I have. So my depressed days are never as bad as someone who has never been there.

T&FN: *Could anything in your career make up for the ban—throwing 240, throwing 75m, winning the Olympic Games?*

Plucknett: Throwing 75m in an enclosed stadium. As far as the Olympics go, I feel that by the time you take your first throw in an Olympic competition, all the places except the order of the first three have already been decided. All the circumstances at an Olympics make it the one meet at which you have the least amount of control over the competitive conditions.

T&FN: *Would regaining the World Record ever mean as much to you again?*

Plucknett: Nothing probably will ever replace throwing against Wolfgang Schmidt in his last competition in the Free World, in Stockholm in 1981. That was my first meet in Stockholm, plus it was the last meet where anyone would have Schmidt as well as Mac Wilkins ganging up on them at once.

So to win the meet—and set a World Record, and beat those two—is a feeling that will never be replaced.

Other important things to me have been beating Al Oerter to make the 1980 Olympic team, throwing the World Record in Modesto, and then the Stockholm meet. And last year to throw over 230 in three consecutive meets.

But Stockholm is just more special. Mac had the meet record at 227 and yet I won by 10 feet. That is why that American Record is very important to me. □

Walter Ben Plucknett was born April 13, 1954, in Beatrice, Nebraska, and is 6-7/325. Graduated from Beatrice High School in 1972 and the University of Missouri in 1976. Has set two ARs: 71.20 (233-7) '81; 72.34 (237-4) '81. Both were superior to WR, but not ratified as such by IAAF. Has shot PR of 67-6 1/4 from 1981 when he was ranked No. 7 U.S. and placed 8th at TAC. His progression (with World and U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	Affil	Class	DT	Major Meets
1972	18	Nb HS	Sr	179-9 hs	
1973	19	Missouri	Fr	182-3	nq)NCAA 1)Jr
1974	20	"	So	173-1	
1975	21	"	Jr	184-6	9)NCAA
1976	22	"	Sr	201-10 (x, 9)	7)OT 4)NCAA
1977	23	Maccabi		198-10 (x, 9)	9)TAC
1978	24	WVTC		204-5 (x, 7)	6)TAC
1979	25	Tobias		216-11 (10, 5)	6)TAC
1980	26	AF Strid		223-8 (6, 3)	3)OT 4)TAC
1981	27	SC Strid		237-4 (1, 1)	1)TAC
1982	28	"		224-9 (x, 4)	
1983	29	4 Corners		234-0 (5, 2)	2)TAC