

by Howard Willman

## BILLY OLSON

**W**hen Abilene Christian U. coach Don Hood first saw Billy Olson at a high school meet in Brownwood, Texas, in 1976, he saw "a kid who was tall, skinny and slow. But the first time I saw him I said, 'That kid could be great.'"

*The prophecy has been fulfilled.*

*One of the nation's best vaulters since 1978, Olson can now claim the World Indoor Record and is threatening to go even higher.*

*The only thing that stops him these days is injury, a situation with which he is all too familiar, from several years worth of hamstring problems to the broken wrist which kept him out of all of the 1981 indoor season.*

*After a hectic day of classes—he has five 70-minute labs in two classes every day—and practice, Billy took the time to discuss vaulting with us, 3 days before his WR in Toronto:*

**T&FN:** How well was training going prior to the Vitalis jump?

**Olson:** I was making 18 feet a lot in practice, and I knew that if I could go that high in practice, I'd go a lot higher in meets. I had an idea that I was going to break the American Record several times in a row this year, and I wanted to do that before I was even going to try the World Record. I've pretty much decided that it's going to take an extremely good jump, each week, to be able to do that. And with all the meets, and all the traveling, I don't think that's going to be possible.

So the next thing I think I'm going to do is just go for the World Record 'cause when I get the good jump to break the AR, I think I can go the 2-3" higher to make the WR. I don't think the WR is out of the question after that 18-6½ last week.

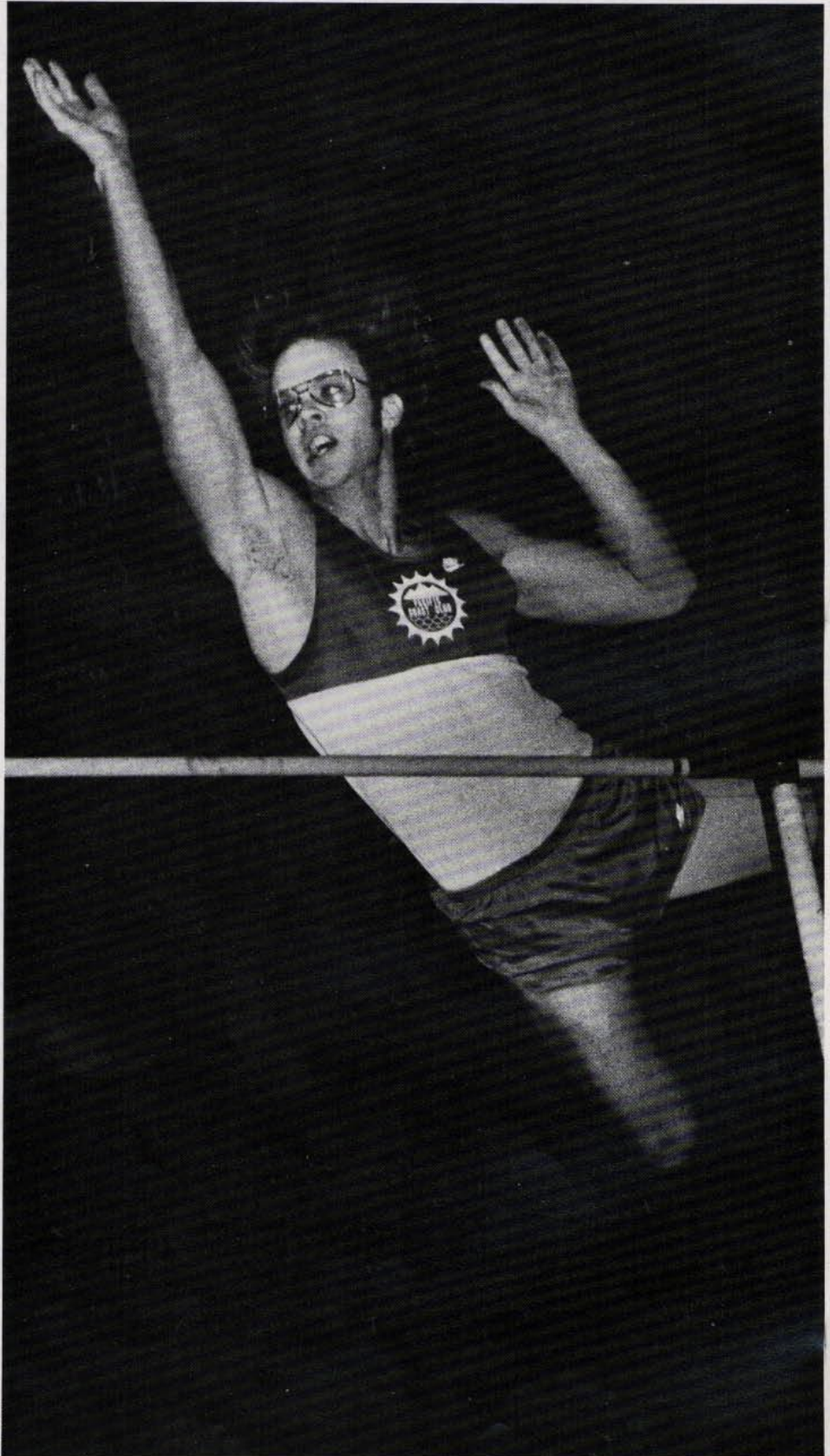
**T&FN:** When do you think you'll find the outdoor AR most accessible?

**Olson:** Oh, it'll probably come in the first meet. I don't know where it's going to be. I think if I was jumping outdoors right now, under any kind of halfway favorable conditions I could jump right around 19-feet.

**T&FN:** Your coach, Don Hood, said one of your attempts at 18-10 two years ago in the NAIA meet had you a foot over the bar, a 19-6 vault for sure if you hadn't come down on it. How do you rate that vault?

**Olson:** It could be considered my best vault ever, except I came down on the bar, so it really couldn't be my best ever. I did a whole lot of things right on that vault. I know I could do it again. But I've had some great vaults besides that one.

At the Olympic Trials, I was probably going almost as high in the air. But I jumped terrible—only 18-feet, and I got 5th. But I made 18-feet by a mile; you know, a foot-and-a-half or two feet.



Berk Hill



**T&FN:** *You stopped jumping at the Vitalis meet after you made the record. Was your hamstring bothering you?*

**Olson:** Yeah. I strained it 2 years ago at the Millrose Games, and my college national meet was the very next weekend. So I came home and rested, loosened it up a little bit.

At the meet, I didn't warm up and the bar was up to 17-6. Everyone else was out and I hadn't taken a jump yet. I made the bar, but I ripped my leg up pretty good. So that was probably pretty dumb. That put me out about 6 weeks. And it's been nagging ever since.

I've gotten it extremely strong, and I'm faster than I ever was before, but it scares me sometimes. I feel it. And I don't like feeling it. Pole vaulters are pretty chronic about hamstring injuries. You know, Ripley got hurt last week at Edmonton.

**T&FN:** *How much did your leg hurt before starting to vault at the Vitalis meet?*

**Olson:** Not a bit.

**T&FN:** *When did the pain begin?*

**Olson:** After about 2 or 3 jumps. My hamstring doesn't bother me when I'm jumping in practice, but it does when I'm going all out—when I'm running as hard as I can down the runway, attacking the box and jumping on my biggest poles—that's when I get sore.

**T&FN:** *Why do you think 3 of last year's top 5 vaulters have joined the PCC?*

**Olson:** I guess everyone in the pole vault seems to like Tom Jennings. He's helped get me out in the open and let people see me, and I'm pleased with that. I think most of the vaulters have a lot of respect for him.

**T&FN:** *You PCC vaulters must get along well with each other.*

**Olson:** Oh yeah, surprisingly well. There are 5 of us on the team—Earl Bell, Dan Ripley, Brad Pursley, Randy Hall and myself—and that's probably most of our competition, or at least a lot of it. It's nice after a competition to go out, get something to eat, talk, you know, have a good time.

**T&FN:** *You're still coached by Don Hood, though.*

**Olson:** Right, totally—training, technique. And he's the best. In fact, that's one of my biggest peeves about track & field—the recognition that Coach Hood has not gotten. Look at all the vaulters he's put out. He's just completely surpassed any other college coach, as far as putting out quality vaulters, and he hasn't gotten anything for it. He hasn't been selected for any teams.

**T&FN:** *And ACU has three over 18-feet. What do you think of the latest, Dale Jenkins?*

**Olson:** Jenkins is scary. He's got whole lots of potential. But I'm real worried about him right now. He's starting to look like me—he's got a bad hamstring. His is looking like it might be worse than *The Bible of the Sport*

mine is, because he pulled it last year.

He came on so good this year. He's been working on the weights, gaining some weight. I watched that guy jump 18-feet three times in a row one day in practice. Just blew me away. Brad and I—our eyes were popping out.

**T&FN:** *He didn't quite get the publicity that the other two preps, Joe Dial and Greg Duplantis, got last year.*

**Olson:** If he stays well, he'll put those other two to shame. I think Dial and Duplantis are good, but he's going to kill 'em.

**T&FN:** *What do you think of ACU's other 18-footer, Brad Pursley?*

**Olson:** I've known Brad since he was a junior in high school. He jumped 14-feet in high school and 17-and-a-half his first year at ACU. That's what I call good coaching. But you could say it was coming.

I mean, the guy's from Merkel, Texas—probably 10 people in the whole city. He's jumping with no facilities, and he'd come out to ACU—it's about 20 miles away—and jump there. He got completely overlooked. I told the coach, "You gotta get this guy. If you don't, it'll be a big mistake." And he's just consistently improved.

**T&FN:** *How much have injuries stopped you?*

**Olson:** I've had a consistent injury the past two years, and that's why I haven't jumped well. Two years ago, in my conference meet, I ran the 100 to help our team out with points. It was right after I vaulted. I took 5th, but I strained my quad. And that summer in Europe, I was jumping really well. I probably attempted the AR in 5 meets. But I got the baddest disease. . . I don't know what it was.

**T&FN:** *Coach Hood says that pole vaulters are a foolhardy breed, with a reckless abandon, and that pole vaulters almost have to be that way. Do you agree?*

**Olson:** Well, I'm far from being a wild-man. I think it's just the stigma that's stuck on pole vaulters, 'cause what we do is just kind of crazy. You've got to be fairly brave, I guess, to run full speed and hold onto a pole at 16-feet and try to jump over a bar at 18- or 19-feet, and land on a pit with cement all around it. It's the nature of the thing. It's like jumping off a cliff—some guys get their kicks off that and some guys wouldn't.

There have been some vaulters who have helped give vaulters that type of reputation. . . guys like (Terry) Porter. . . there have been some crazy guys.

I think pole vaulters in general are the best total athletes than any other event. Maybe that's not right, but I know all the different things it involves, and I don't know anybody else who does all the things that we do.

**T&FN:** *You work out in the gym 2-3 times a week, you lift 6 times a week and of course you jump. What else do you do besides train?*

**Olson (laughing):** Well, I flunk out of school 'cause of all the training. No, it just depends on what your goals are. You know, as long as I still have the ability and the desire to do it, I want to do it the best I can. So I'm trying to work as hard as I can. I figure that if I'm not the best athlete that maybe I can beat some of the guys by out-working them, and I know I've worked hard. Brad's worked hard, and so has really everybody down here. I think you're going to see a lot from the ACU vaulters this year 'cause we've just put in so much work.

**T&FN:** *Will you continue to work hard until you can reap the benefits of all your work?*

**Olson:** I'm going to work right through this indoor season and see what happens. One thing that's hurt me is that I haven't been able to vault during the week, 'cause my leg hurts so much from jumping at the meets.

**T&FN:** *I understand you like golf.*

**Olson:** It's my second-favorite sport. When I get too old to pole vault, they can bury me on the golf course. I'll tell you who's a good golfer, and that's Brad. In the summer, when there's no school and we don't have any meets on a weekend, we play in a tournament every weekend that we can.

**T&FN:** *How well do you shoot?*

**Olson:** In the 70s. Mostly with Brad and me it's a driving contest—to see who can hit it the farthest.

**T&FN:** *How far is that?*

**Olson:** We get it out there. Seriously, pretty consistently we can hit it about 325-330 yards. That's our big kick—seeing who can smack it the farthest. But our problem is once we get up there. You know, we can drive the green but then it takes us about 5 to get down. All muscles and no touch, I guess.

**T&FN:** *What are your plans after graduation?*

**Olson:** I'm probably going to stay in Abilene for a while and keep working with Coach Hood. If I can hold up, I'd really like to jump till '84. I don't think there are three guys that can beat me at the Olympic Trials. There might be one who might come up, but I don't think there'll be three. □

Billy Richard Olson was born July 19, 1958, in Abilene, Texas and is 6-2/160, with blue eyes and blond hair. Graduated from Abilene High in 1976 and briefly attended Baylor before transferring to Abilene Christian. Has won 6 NAIA titles (3 indoor, 3 outdoors, was the 1977 TAC Junior Champ and won the 1981 TAC title. He was 5th in the 1980 Olympic Trials. A public relations major, he didn't begin vaulting until the 11th grade. He is now No. 4 on the all-time U.S. list. His progression, including position on the yearly world list (WL) and U.S. list (USL):

Year	Age	Affil.	Class	Mark	Rank	WL	USL
1975	16/17	Tx HS	Jr	14-9			
1976	17/18	"	Sr	15-10			
1977	18/19	unat		17-0		=88	=28
1978	19/20	ACU	Fr	17-10½ (x, 10)	17	8	
1979	20/21	"	So	18-½ (x, 4)	=14	4	
1980	22/23	"	Jr	18-7½ (9, 2)	8	2	
1981	22/23	PCC		18-4½ (x, 2)	=15	3	
1982	23/24	ACU	Sr	18-8½			