

# Charles Austin

by Jon Hendershott

With his win at the World Indoor Championships in March, Charles Austin is now one of the rare athletes who can claim a gold medal from all three of the majors, having won the Olympic title in Atlanta and the World Outdoor crown at Tokyo in '91. The 29-year-old Texan has also owned the outdoor American Record of 7-10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> since '91.

Austin is a private man, quiet and soft-spoken. But his intense competitiveness emerges on the jumping apron, a determination he now turns toward the World Record.

Austin draws great inspiration from his family and two young sons—but equally from the growing self-confidence which literally has carried him to the heights:

**T&FN:** A lot has happened to Charles Austin in the past year. Can you contrast where you are now with where you were a year ago?

**Austin:** Now I'm so much more confident, since I accomplished the goals I had set for myself and because my knee hasn't given me any trouble. When I jump now, I don't worry anymore that it's going to hurt me.

Going through the things I've dealt with in the past couple of years, I'm more comfortable with who I am. I accept life for what it is. I just try to take advantage of every opportunity presented to me. Especially with my jumping, when I have an opportunity, I try to give it my best.

**T&FN:** Even back when you won the '90 NCAA, you were having problems with the patellar tendon in your left knee. Surgery in '93 basically took care of that. But was it the knee that caused some frustrations in your career?

**Austin:** Yes, because that injury prevented me from getting the best out of myself in my jumping. I believed in myself and in my ability,

**"I don't have the one I really want—the World Record."**

but my knee gave me so much trouble. It got to the point where it was tough to tolerate the pain.

I got really frustrated going into a competition knowing I wouldn't be able to jump very much. I'd have to be very selective with how many jumps I took. The knee got to the point where it hurt really bad and it just wore me down mentally.

The surgery took care of things, although in

'95, the knee bothered me a little. But I decided that was just mental. That fall I told myself, "Okay, that's enough. I've let this problem get the best of me, but I'm not going to worry about it anymore."

I was determined to concentrate on my jumping, or I'd give it up. My decision was to become the best—the best ever.

**T&FN:** Was it a help experience-wise to have competed in the Barcelona Olympics?

**Austin:** It helped a great deal because I knew what to expect at the Games. But I also felt extra pressure to jump well. Then because of my knee, I wasn't in the best mental state of mind. I wondered if I could pull it off. By the time we got to 7-8, I pretty much wasn't even in it. I basically had knocked myself out of it by the way I was thinking.

**T&FN:** Not doing well in Barcelona was painful because you're very demanding of yourself. But is it possible that if you won in '92 might you have retired?

**Austin:** Oh no, not even. I don't hold the World Record yet. Other than winning the Worlds and Olympics, my main thing always has been the World Record. That's something I want very badly. I'm very happy to have achieved the goals I have so far. But still, I don't have the one I really want—the World Record.

Even if I had won the Olympics in '92, I wouldn't have retired. I'm having more fun all the time doing this. I started jumping late and it was just something to do and I didn't take it seriously. But in the past five to six years, I've really started to believe in myself and my confidence really is growing.

**T&FN:** After winning the Atlanta Trials and being healthy, plus having the Olympics at home, what was your attitude going into the Games?

**Austin:** Don't take this as me being cocky, but I had the feeling way back in February that I'd win the Games. So I went in focusing solely on breaking the World Record.

After the '96 indoor nationals, my agent Cubie Seegobin sent me a pamphlet that mentioned high jumpers who had won the indoor national title and then went on to do well in the Olympics. I just got the feeling I'd win the Games. From then on, I didn't worry about winning, just about setting the World Record.

I felt that if I stayed clean through 7-9 and didn't waste any of my jumps, it would happen. But then after I missed twice at 7-9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>, I told myself to concentrate on what I was doing. So I passed to 7-10. But even though I had only one jump, I didn't even worry about it. It was just like, "Okay, move back and let me go."

**T&FN:** It was a great competition, but Artur Partyka basically forced you to make 7-10. He made 7-9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> but you missed, so you had to pass to 7-10. Did you enjoy that kind of competition?



**Austin:** Yes, that was a great competition; easily the best I've ever been in. Having that confidence in myself of, "This is going to happen. I'm going to clear this," was great.

I always have wanted to be in a competition where everyone was on, everyone was at their best. As well as breaking the World Record, I'd like to have that happen again many times before I leave the sport.

Having everybody at their very best is a great mental challenge, as well as physical. Being in that situation, you either have the mental strength and toughness to pull it off, or you don't.

**T&FN:** It must be really exciting when you go into the biggest meet healthy, ready, confident. All the ingredients were there, but some were missing in Barcelona.

**Austin:** For me, it's just having that confidence. I believed that for those guys to beat me in Atlanta, they were going to have to jump a PR. But I had no doubts: I was ready, in shape to jump the World Record.

Making 7-10 was a huge confidence booster. Mainly, I proved a point to myself: if you focus on what you want to accomplish and you believe, you can make it happen. So making 7-10 gave me a big boost and it was like, "Now the competition really begins!"



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was there, my three sisters and two of my six brothers.

But my boys weren't there to celebrate with me. Sure, they were there in my heart and in my spirit. But I wanted them right there; I wanted to hold them and celebrate with them. The two who gave me all my strength and energy weren't there.

**T&FN:** You said you got into high jumping late. What first attracted you to it?

**Austin:** Friends talked me into coming out when I was a high school senior in Van Vleck, Texas. High jumping is what really caught my attention. It looked fun. The coach said I couldn't be on the team, but finally said if I jumped 6 feet, I could join the team.

So at that very moment, I jumped 6 feet and it was no problem at all. He let me on the team. I made 6-11 that year, although I missed the state meet.

**T&FN:** Was that when you really began to "learn" the event?

**Austin:** Not at all. I give full credit to Rocky Light, my coach at Southwest Texas. He first said, "Charles if you work at it, you can really jump." Even my first two years in college, I didn't train at all, yet I still improved. My first year I made 7-1, then 7-2 as a soph.

So Rocky said, "You either get serious and train or go home." I didn't want to go back to Van Vleck, so I said I'd try. In '89, I got 2nd in the NCAA to Hollis [Conway]. As a senior, I won. I give Rocky so much credit for turning me around and making me believe in my ability.

**T&FN:** Is the high jump who Charles Austin is, as a person?

**Austin:** Not even. To me this is play, not reality. It's a chance to have fun. Even if I am Olympic champion, I'm the same person regardless of where I am. I don't consider myself, "Charles Austin, the athlete." I'm just "Charles, the person," like anyone. I just have a different job from most.

**T&FN:** After you made 7-10 at the Games, you had the bar raised to 8-3/4. Even in '91 after you won the Tokyo Worlds, you had it put up to 8-3/4. So 8 feet isn't an intimidating height to you?

**Austin:** Not even. Eight feet still isn't the World Record. I want the record. I figure if I make 8 feet itself, or 7-11, I'm going to be high enough to clear the World Record. I have the American Record; I appreciate it and I'm thankful for it. But I want to be the best ever. That means the World Record.

I realize I have to be a bit more patient. Instead of trying to rush, I need to settle down. That's something I've been working on this year: just waiting and being patient. I know it's there, so it's just a matter of time. □

**T&FN:** Is meeting the potential Charles Austin feels he brings into a meet your toughest standard?

**Austin:** It is. That's the only thing that I go on. I set the challenges for myself. I don't let anybody else put any burden on me: "You have to prove this or that." I like setting goals and then challenging myself to accomplish them. I don't worry at all about the other jumpers; I just concentrate on what Charles wants to do.

**T&FN:** After you made 7-10, there was your emotional—shall we say—epithet. Was that directed toward the other jumpers?

**Austin:** It was more in general. I felt that a lot of people had counted me out, even though I'd been jumping well all year. I had asked several companies for sponsorship help but none did. I had had some personal and financial problems leading up to the Trials and Games, but I felt I was showing everyone, "Hey, it's not over yet."

**T&FN:** Your jumping career could also provide ample evidence of how tough you could be.

**Austin:** Yes, it could. And I also get so much strength from my boys, Cameron who is 6 and Alex who is 3. I get a lot of energy from them. Having them, and having them believe in me the way they do, I had to take care of business. They're my energy source. I have to keep that

energy source strong, because that's what I thrive on.

**T&FN:** Do they have much understanding of what you achieved over the past year? Do they know what the Olympics mean, and how important this thing called high jumping is to their Dad?

**Austin:** I think they have a good general idea, because we've talked about jumping or seen film or they've seen me talk to other people around town.

But as for the importance, I don't think they understand that yet. They mimic others: "Dad won the Olympics." Or, "Can I have your autograph, Dad?"

When we go out, sometimes they'll say, "Oh, we're going to be in the store a long time. Dad's gonna sign autographs." They love to tease me.

**T&FN:** What were your feelings when you received your gold medal and heard the national anthem played because of what you did?

**Austin:** It was a tough time. I was very happy to be back at the Games, win it at home and hear the anthem at the biggest meet ever. But my boys weren't there, so it was really hard for me.

I was very appreciative and thankful to God for giving all that to me, but there was a big part of my life missing. I mean my mother Ernestean