

Bryan Clay

by Jon Hendershott

“In decathlon history, my three throwing bests give the second-best total ever. For my size, we just can’t figure out how it happened”



Bryan Clay demands a lot of himself in the decathlon, even after winning this year’s world title. He doesn’t know any other way.

Texas-born, Hawai’i-raised and athletically developed at southern California’s Azusa Pacific, the versatile 25-year-old has always aimed high. Each success is just the latest step toward fulfilling Clay’s ever-expanding dream of greatness.

The quiet, deeply religious athlete is quick to give prime credit for his successes to a key support group around him: wife Sarah and new son Jacob; coaches Kevin Reid, Rana Reider, Luke Walker and Mike Barnett; trainer Kalan Cavasoz and physician Dr. Bill Tullock. “Without them all, it would be impossible to have what I have now,” says Clay.

Or for him to look ahead to fulfilling more dreams:

T&FN: You said you haven’t yet gotten your head around the idea of “Bryan Clay, decathlon world champion.” You also said the same thing last fall about being Olympic silver medalist. Do you somehow not see yourself in such terms?

Clay: I know I’ve done well and I know people will think of me as world champion. But when I was dreaming as a little kid of being able to call myself something like that, I didn’t really think of myself in those terms.

I wanted to get to the status of a Dan O’Brien and those guys.

There’s so much more I need to do. I can understand being called world champion; I know I’ve worked hard to deserve it. At the same time, I’m nowhere near the respect factor of them. I haven’t put up the history of marks or anything like that. It’s hard to compare yourself to your heroes.

T&FN: In Helsinki you said you had dreamed of something like that since you were 8 years old. What was that dream?

Clay: I remember watching Carl Lewis at the ’88 Olympics when I was 8 and seeing him throw up his arms at the end of a race, grab the U.S. flag for a victory lap and the announcers saying he could be one of the greatest track athletes ever.

I got goose bumps and I told my mom, “When I get older, I want to be like that.”

T&FN: Both the sport in general and the decathlon specifically have become very central in your life. Are they basically a way of life?

Clay: It is. If you ask anyone seriously in the sport, there’s really no other way to do it if you want to be really successful. It needs to be a way of life or at least a major part of your

life, like anything else you want to succeed in. I was lucky enough to have parents, family and coaches around me at a young age who really took the time to teach me that.

T&FN: You met Chris Huffins at a clinic the summer after your soph year in high school and he first mentioned the decathlon to you. After your junior year, he told you about Azusa Pacific and coach Kevin Reid and you decided to go there?

Clay: Yes. Once I got to school, it was a big wakeup call for me; there were a few times when I felt like quitting.

It was so much harder than what I was used to doing in high school. But just like I had my support group back at home, with my parents and family, I had people here who wouldn’t let me fall behind or quit.

So, every year it got a little better and every year the goal of making the Olympics became more of a reality. I came to think I could make the team, then win a medal.

Now my thought is, “Maybe you can break the World Record.” Every day, it turns into a new goal and a new dream, but it’s stemming from the one I had when I was 8 years old.

T&FN: You’ve said before you still don’t feel you’ve done anything “special” in the decathlon.

Would the World Record be "special"?

Clay: I honestly don't know. It's definitely one thing that would boost my résumé, but I look at stats like the top 10 averages of the best guys. I'm nowhere near them, so there's still a lot of work to be done.

It would be great to be the WR holder, a multiple world champion and the Olympic gold medalist. But I don't think that just those things qualify me as "the world's best decathlete."

T&FN: You're still a young guy, only 25. You've got a lot of your career ahead of you.

Clay: I do, but I have high expectations of myself and always have. I'm very competitive. I don't like to be 2nd, 3rd or 4th. It's not going to be satisfying anymore to be 2nd. After you have won, that feeling of being 2nd isn't a fun place to be.

But while it's great I won the gold medal at the Worlds and it definitely will go very high in my book of great memories. But everything that came with the Olympics... The silver medal was great but for me the more impressive thing in Athens was the actual score [a PR 8820]. Even now, the score just blows my mind.

T&FN: You didn't finish the Worlds of either '01 or '03 because of injuries. You have said both were tremendous learning experiences

for you. How did those early disappointments contribute to the Bryan Clay we saw in Athens and Helsinki?

Clay: Those two experiences definitely were factors in how I compete and how my mental focus is today. I had to learn, first, that I was just as good as everybody else. Those two meets provided opportunities for me to learn that I'm just as good—maybe better—than anybody else on the track. So they provided me with a lot of confidence.

They also taught me how to not give up. It really helped my mental toughness in the decathlon. I realized you don't have to have all your strong events hit right on the money to do well. I learned that the decathlon isn't about putting up huge marks from the very get-go.

It's about being consistent and as close as possible to what you can do every day.

Another thing I learned from those two meets was that I

didn't like not being able to do the mass victory lap with everybody.

It's such a prideful thing and I learned every guy takes so much pride in just finishing the decathlon, no matter what place he's in.

It's about finishing, not necessarily winning. So there was so much I took away from those two experiences. If they hadn't happened, I don't think I would be the athlete I am now.

T&FN: For an elite-level decathlete, is the event almost more mental than physical?

At the World and Olympic levels, the top guys are all pretty equal in physical abilities, so is it the mental toughness that makes the difference?

Clay: I'm sore physically after a decathlon, but I'm nowhere near as drained physically as I am mentally. I'm just so beat mentally... it's hard to explain. And what makes all the difference in the world is when you finally start to really believe that you can do it.

I'd say it's 80% mental and 20% physical. There are many people out there with the same physical ability, but they mentally fall apart. Without the mental toughness and strength, there's nothing you can do.

You can be the most talented athlete in the world, but the mental aspect is huge, the biggest part of it. And more so for the decathlon because we've got so many different events to do.

T&FN: You used to be known more as a sprinter-jumper-hurdler type of decathlete. But this year, your throws went off the charts.

Clay: Before the 1500 in Helsinki, and even after the USATF discus [a decathlon WR 183-3/55.87], I told Kevin and Rana, "Isn't it funny that the events you might expect me to break the decathlon WR in—the 100 or long jump—didn't happen. But the ones we never expected to come close in I'm doing it."

In decathlon history, my three throwing bests give the second-best total ever [2734 points, 14 behind leader Michael Smith in '96]. For my size, we just can't figure out how it happened.

T&FN: Last year, Kevin said one major thing you would emphasize in '05 was building strength. So there was a conscious decision to work more on that.

But what's the tradeoff of increased strength and maybe body weight for the throws with 1500 training?

Clay: It's tough and we're

still trying to find that magic combination. We're going to make some additions in training for next year. This past season, I really didn't get in any extra mileage. I started out doing it, but by the end of the year with the injuries [a broken rib,

Clay Got Motivation From Pappas

Most of the decathlon's all-time stars have had great rivals: Bob Mathias had Milt Campbell, Rafer Johnson had Vasiliy Kuznetsov & C.K. Yang, for Bruce Jenner it was Nikolay Avilov. And who can forget "Dan or Dave?"?

Bryan Clay has had some great competitions with WR holder Roman Sebrle but has also had Tom Pappas at home. His analysis of Pappas's role:

"Tom was very pivotal in me believing I could be as good as everybody else. I had never had the chance to go overseas to compete against Roman and those guys, except at the Worlds and Olympics.

"I'd see Tom win in Götzis, yet I knew how to compete against him. I knew I could beat him, even though I hadn't done it yet. So seeing him beat those big guys kind of brought them back down to earth for me and helped me realize that they were just human. That was important for me.

"Also, Tom gave me somebody at home I could compete with and do things with, like go to camps and clinics. He gave me someone in my backyard that I could watch and aim for. I wasn't wowed by seeing him compete. Without him, I don't know if I would have done as well in those years as I did.

"I talked with Dan and Chris and when they competed, the best guys in the world were right in their backyards. They told me that's why the decathlon was so strong for the U.S. in the '90s, because those guys competed against each other every meet. So they were human. You knew where each of you traded points and you weren't awestruck by them because you saw them all the time."

then plantar fasciitis], we just ran out of time. I wasn't able to get in distance work for the last eight weeks of the season. But there really is no excuse for it. With a PR of 4:38, I should be able to run 4:40 brainless. That's going to be a major goal next year.

T&FN: Running 5:03 like in Helsinki just prolongs the agony, doesn't it?

Clay: It does. But I don't think people understand what goes into the decathlon. It's so hard for us to get excited to run the 1500. In Helsinki, I was so drained from the mental exertion of going through the entire meet. It was by far the hardest meet I've ever done in my life.

I was so mentally and physically drained at the end, I didn't have anything left in the tank. That's a scary feeling and a lot of it was because I wasn't able to train fully. I don't want that feeling again. I don't ever want to go into the 1500 again worrying that I don't have anything left and I could get beat because of it.

So the goal for this coming year is to keep everything where's it at, while adding a little more to the program so that I'm fit.

Then the next time I have to really run the 1500, it'll be for the World Record and I can easily run whatever time I need. □

— Clay Facts —

•**Personal:** born Austin, Texas, 1/3/80. 5-11/174 (1.80/79)

•**PRs:** 8820 ('04) (6, 14 W; 2, 4 A) (event PRs: 10.36; 26-1¹/₂/7.96 [26-5w/8.05], 53-3³/₄/16.25, 6-9³/₄/2.08, 47.78, 13.78, 183-3/55.87, 16-8³/₄/5.10, 236-3/72.00, 4:38.93)

•**Schools:** Castle HS (Kaneohe, Hawai'i) '96; Azusa Pacific '02; now represents Nike

•**Major Meets:** 1)USAJ, 1)PAJ '99; 3)US, dnf)WC '01; 2)US '02; 2)US, dnf)WC '03; 1)OT, 2)OG '04; 1)US, 1)WC '05. Hept—2)WIC '04

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** '01—x, 4; '02—x, 3; '03—5, 2; '04—2/1; '05—1?/1?