

T&FN INTERVIEW

Bryan Clay

by Jon Hendershott

Bryan Clay felt an immense sense of relief in Beijing after he finished the 1500 and secured the Olympic decathlon gold medal. He had achieved a goal he dreamed about since age 8 and had worked toward for a decade.

There were the immediate rewards—Letterman and Oprah, speaking engagements and personal appearances, endorsement deals including the famous Wheaties box (see sidebar).

But it took Clay some months to recharge his mental batteries to be able to resume the high-level training his discipline demands. Now he encourages fans to follow him on Twitter and Facebook as he aims for specific goals both this season and next:

T&FN: *You say you and your coaching team—Kevin Reid as your day-to-day coach, Paul Doyle and Rana Reider as designers of your program, Mike Barnett in the throws and weight training and Brooks Morris in the vault—meets and decides on goals. So what is your main aim in '09?*

Clay: My primary goal for '09, really, is to try to stay healthy. I always say that I don't know if the decathlon World Record can be broken at a Worlds or Olympics, just because of the scheduling.

That's very difficult to do, especially now with the record being so tough. Roman [Šebrle] set the bar so high.

That being said, the goal definitely is to try for the American Record and the World Record.

I once asked Roman what it takes to break the WR and he said it takes two years of solid training, good competition and without any

major injuries. I've really taken that to heart and that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to stack together two good years where my base is strong. Then pick and choose the meets I do to try and attack those records.

Of course, I want to compete well this year,

but I'm really looking forward to trying to break the World Record in 2010. If it doesn't happen then, there's always 2011 and '12.

T&FN: *Last year, was it harder to cope with the ultra-high expectations leading to the Trials and Games? Or has post-Olympic life brought its own new set of challenges?*

Clay: They are both difficult in their own way. The pressures before the Olympics are one thing. Then after you win that gold medal, life changes. You've got a million different people pulling you in a million different ways: family, media and of course training. There are your kids and all are tugging you in different directions while you're trying to maximize all of it.

Of course, once you win the gold you don't want to get beaten ever again. So that's a different mental outlook right there. I mean, before I won the gold I didn't ever like to get beat—but now I really don't want to get beaten. It's like you either retire, or you see to it you don't get beat.

"So I feel the pressure now of not wanting to get beat—not that anyone else is putting it on me, but it's what I expect from myself. So the pressures are different, but they're both equally difficult in their own way.

T&FN: *A decathlete gets to compete in his full event only a couple of times a season. Is that hard to do, to have to train so much for just a few competitive chances?*

Clay: I've always said that you have to go into a decathlon with a full tank of gas, mentally and physically. If I allow myself to somehow emotionally let nerves use up a little bit of that gas before the decathlon, then I won't make it through. That's just the way it is.

"So when you're in that competition, you keep everything else out because you've got to start that dec topped off. Otherwise at the end of it, you're going to run out of gas before the tenth event.

I mean, you're running on fumes in the last event anyway. In the last stretch of the 1500, the only thing you're running on at that point is adrenaline. You can't cut it any closer than that and if you use any of that energy for anything else but compet-

Clay In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Bryan Ezra Clay was born January 3, 1980, in Austin, Texas; 5-10¾/183 (1.80/83)

•**Schools:** Castle HS (Kaneohe, Hawai'i) '98; Azusa Pacific '02; now represents Nike

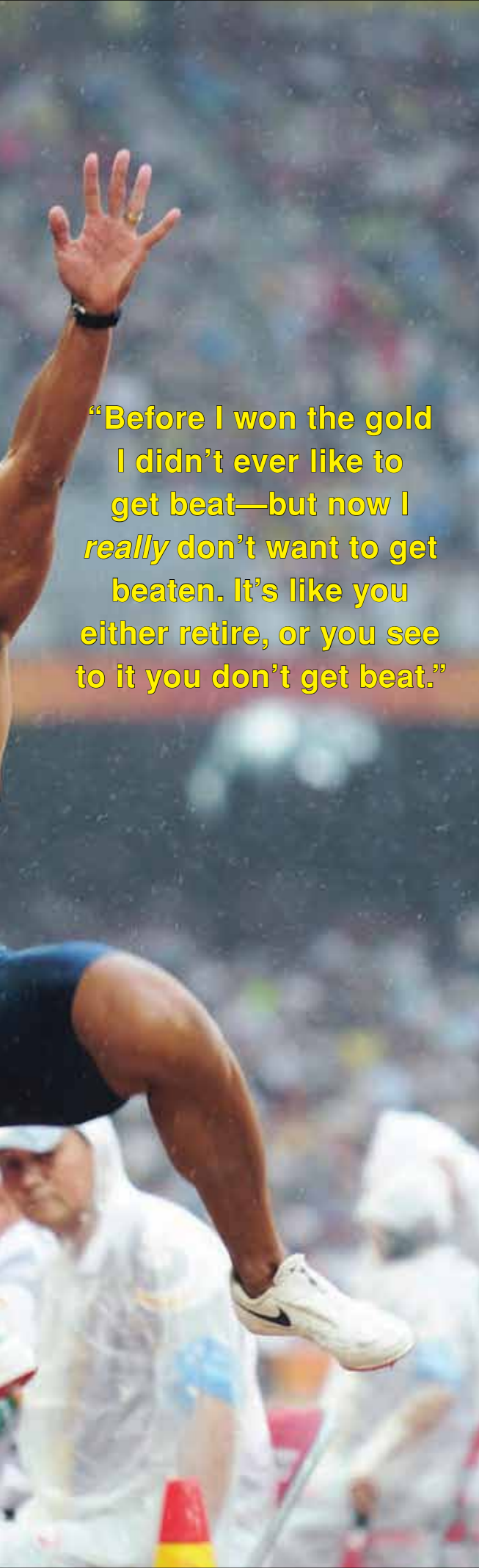
•**PRs:** Decathlon—8832 ('08) (=5, =11 W; 2, 3 A). 100—10.36 ('05). LJ—26-1½/7.96 ('04). SP—53-4½/16.27 ('08). HJ—6-10¾/2.10 ('06). 400—47.78 ('05). 110H—13.74 ('06). DT—183-3/55.87 ('05). PV—16-10¾/5.15 ('08). JT—236-3/72.00 ('05). 1500—4:38.93 ('01)

•**Coaches:** Duncan Macdonald (youth club); Martin Hee (Castle); Kevin Reid (Azusa Pacific, pro)

•**Major Meets:** 1)USJ, 1)PAJ '01; 3)US, dnf)WC, 13)WUG '01; 2)US '02; 2)US, dnf)WC '03; 1)OT, 2)OG '04; 1)US, 1)WC '05; dnf)US '06; dnf)US, dnf)WC '07; 1)OT, 1)OG '08

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** '01—x, 4; '02—x, 3; '03—5, 2; '04—2, 1; '05—1, 1; '06—1, 1; '07—6, 1; '08—1, 1





“Before I won the gold I didn’t ever like to get beat—but now I really don’t want to get beaten. It’s like you either retire, or you see to it you don’t get beat.”

ing, you’re toast.

T&FN: So after all that, now when you hear the words, “Bryan Clay, Olympic decathlon champion,” what do you feel?

Clay: It just *weird!* For so long, I looked at people like Daley Thompson, Dan O’Brien, Bill Toomey, Bruce Jenner. When you start to do an event, you study it, learn about it; learn what those guys scored, when and where.

“These are guys I studied. Now to be introduced on the same level as them... or have kids tell me I’m their idol, or parents thank me for being an example for their child.

For people to say those things about me just blows my mind. I think, “Wait a second. I’m not anybody special. I’m just Bryan.”

It’s hard for me to understand what they’re feeling. I hear it and to a certain extent I understand it, but the authenticity of these people is just difficult for me to understand.

In my mind I think, “I went out and did something that’s fun and I enjoy. Yeah, I won a gold medal but I’m just... Bryan.”

I will have memories of that for the rest of my life. But I tell people that, yes, I love what I do, which is track & field, but that’s not who I am. It’s a part of who I am, but it’s not *everything* I am.

I won a gold medal, yes, but there are other things I’ve done, too. But other people have other views of you and it’s really humbling.

T&FN: Are there ways you feel you have to behave and carry yourself as an Olympic decathlon champion?

Clay: 100% yes. When I signed my letter to come to Azusa Pacific, Kevin Reid said to me, “Remember, ‘To whom much is given, much is expected.’”

I think he believed from that point on that my life was going to be different. I was going to accomplish the dream I had and he was very good about telling me, “God is going to bless you. You are going to achieve amazing things, but much will be expected of you.”

He followed that up with, “Opportunity doesn’t equal obligation.” I’ve always remembered those two things.

When you are blessed and you’ve been able to accomplish something and there are people

who tell you things like I’ve been told, then yes, you are held to a higher standard.

I look at what I’ve accomplished and my goal always has been to create a platform to go out and relate the Kingdom of God.

I always tell people, “I accomplished what I have on the track because I was a champion in life first.” It wasn’t the other way around. I was able to do what I’ve done on the track

Sizing Up The Competition

One of Bryan Clay’s perks after winning in Beijing was an endorsement contract with General Mills to appear on the front of Wheaties. He became the 13th trackster to be pictured on the cereal box since athletes first appeared on the now-iconic container in 1934.

“It’s really cool, an absolute honor to be on the box,” he says. “When my brother and I were growing up, we used to see the different sports figures on the box. After I started the decathlon and started learning about it and learned the decathletes who had been on the box, I thought, ‘Aw, that would be really cool if I could do that.’”

“To be one of three decathletes ever to be on the box—with Dan [O’Brien] and Bruce [Jenner], arguably among the best decathletes in U.S. history, let alone the world—to think that kids doing the decathlon in 15–20 years maybe were inspired by me, is just a huge thing. It’s something I’ll never forget.”

But there’s another side, Clay admits. “When I’m in the store, I try to avoid the cereal aisle,” he laughs. “It would be like posting a bunch of pictures of yourself on your bedroom wall.

“But when my wife takes the kids to the store, they always come home with a box. I think they think that everybody’s dad is on a Wheaties box. To them, I’m just dad. My son refers to the picture as, ‘Oh, that’s Bryan Clay.’ It’s like they’re two separate people.”

because I took care of my responsibilities spiritually and also with my family. I give 100% to those areas. If I do that, it frees me—mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually—to give 100% to track and field.

“I also believe you have to have balance. I always say my priorities are God first, family second and track third. That’s my motto.

When I can put God first, it gives me the parameters, the focus, everything I need to make my family happy. Being the father and husband I need to be, making them happy, that allows me the freedom emotionally and physically to give 100% to the sport. If I have distractions in those other areas, then I can’t give track 100%. So the priorities are very important and I really try to live my life by them.

T&FN: What do you think about the supposed “title” of “World’s Greatest Athlete” being tied to the Olympic decathlon champion?

Clay: I don’t pay that much attention to it. The title is a great title that has always been accorded to the decathlon champion. It all comes down to your interpretation and everybody

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CLAY — continued

is going to have a different view of what the "ultimate athlete" would need to have. Some think it's specializing in one event in one sport, while others think it's being well-rounded in every sport.

I do think the decathlon is a great test to see how good an athlete you are. Very few things test you to the degree that I think the decathlon does: mentally, emotionally, spiritually, physically. It tests every ounce of you; your mental and physical capabilities.

Now, I'm not saying it's the *only* test. There are athletes who do amazing things outside the decathlon. But if you're looking for an overall test of athleticism, the decathlon is a great place to start.

It tests your ability to learn skills and your athletic ability, but also being able to adapt, to make split-second decisions, to adapt to weather and mental and physical fatigue. It tests everything. And that's why I say that at the end of a decathlon, you have absolutely nothing left.

T&FN: By its very nature of extreme testing, the decathlon builds tremendous camaraderie among competitors, doesn't it?

Clay: I tell people there is a certain amount of pride and respect in finishing, not necessarily winning, a decathlon. Winning is great, but just in finishing a decathlon there is respect. You know you have tested yourself; you have taken yourself to hell and back. It is one of the most grueling tests there is and when you do it at the level we do, it's absolutely brutal.

I also say it's like going to war with a group of guys you don't know. After you're done your "tour" over two days, you may not like the guy you're standing next to, but you sure as heck respect him. You know exactly what he went through, because you went through it together.

T&FN: You have the whole new situation this year of being Olympic champion, of being famous, of being a product-endorser. How has it been to try to work in training with all those other things? Or do you try to work in the other things with your training? Which comes first?

Clay: It depends on the time of year. Right after the Games, we were doing the big media blitz. I thought that things would slow down soon and there wouldn't be as many requests. But we're still getting requests on a daily basis, for speaking engagements and so forth. By no means am I going to say I don't like that, because it's great. But I definitely had to make the decision that training has to come first. It's another difficult line to balance.

So it's a difficult year, but I think it's a dif-

ficult year for everybody. Coming into the year, we know that after winning the Olympics, it's hard to come back and do things. We expected that and we planned accordingly.

The biggest thing for me is that the last 10 years have been such a hard push for me. Everything about my life was trying to get me one step closer to winning the gold medal. So after feeling that huge relief after the Games, it took me a long time mentally to be ready to



JIRO MICHIZUKI/PHOTO RUN

"If you're looking for an overall test of athleticism, the decathlon is a great place to start."

get after training again.

"A very long time. I told my agent and coaches, "I just have no desire to take myself to that place again." I was so beat up mentally. It took me a long time to get back to the point where I said, "OK, I can do this. Let's do it." Now that we're at that place, things are going great.

T&FN: So how is it going looking forward to the Nationals and Worlds?

Clay: I'm excited about competing and I'm excited about going after the records. I think we have a great plan in place to have a solid year this year. Then next year having the freedom to pick meets with the intent of having a really good meet.

If the World Record comes at that meet, great. If not, oh well, we're still going to try to have a great meet. Even getting a PR by 1 point would be great. □