

T&FN's COFOUNDER INTERVIEWED

Cordner Nelson

by Jon Hendershott
& Sieg Lindstrom

Cordner Nelson can rightfully claim to have seen several lifetimes worth of track & field. He has witnessed thousands of meets, athletes and records, dating back to the '32 Olympics.

The 79-year-old California native figures he must be the only track fan to have twice celebrated his birthday at the Games—in the same stadium (LA Coliseum).

He also claims to have seen more U.S. Olympic Trials than anyone else, 13: "Echo Summit in '68 is my clincher," he says. "One day there were barely 150 fans in the stands. There were more athletes than spectators."

But by far the most significant claim Nelson can make is that he and younger brother Bert started Track & Field News, a move which led to each's induction into USATF's Hall Of Fame.

Nelson, now retired in seaside Carmel, hasn't lost an ounce of his passion for the sport. And, naturally, a lifetime of track fandom has produced a lifetime of track memories:

T&FN: How did your interest in track really start?

Nelson: I remember high jumping in second grade. There was a high jump pit at our grammar school; that was near San Diego. Then we moved up to Riverside and I built my own high jump standards and jumped in our yard.

It must have been 1931 when I got really interested. The Olympics were coming and we just started having races. The roads in town were just dirt; we usually just ran what we felt like but later, we tried to measure off specific distances. I paced off a 220y stretch and we'd run up, turn around and come back.

For the first 440 I ever ran, we had an electric clock and I put it in the living room window. I started there and ran sort of a curve out of the house and out into the street. I ran up the street and came back to where the clock was—I can't remember a time, but it couldn't have been very good. About a minute and a half.

T&FN: Even then, you were aware you had to

know your time, height, or distance in the sport.

Nelson: I was already into the measurement part of it, again because the Olympics were coming. At that time, Maxwell Stiles wrote about track for an LA paper and he was the best track writer I ever remember reading.

Max wrote about all these good foreign

T&FN: Did you even know what the Olympics were?

Nelson: Probably not before 1931 when I really started paying attention to track. I may have seen the term because I read the sports pages a lot.

The first day we went to the Games my dad took the family. Those seats must have cost nearly \$2 each; we sat along the backstretch, near to where we sat in '84. The discus was in front of us, but the vault was at the far end of the Coliseum. I recall that a Frenchman [Jules Noel] got a big discus throw, but the officials all were watching the vault, which was a great competition. They missed the throw and remarked it several feet short. That was one mad Frenchman.

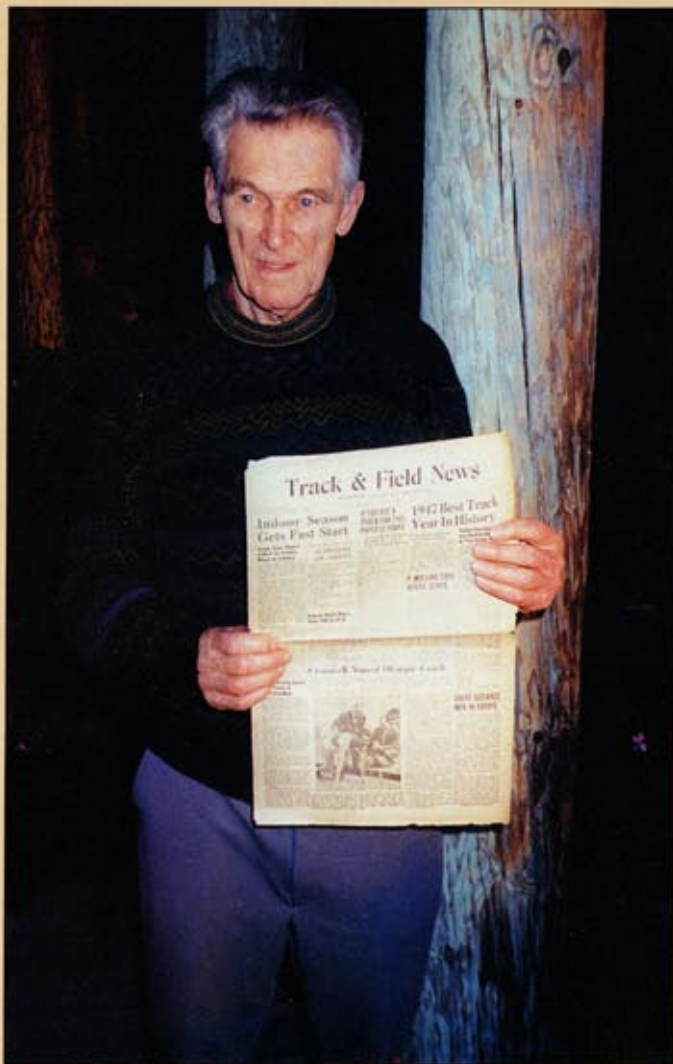
I got to go to those Games for a second time—on my 14th birthday—partly because my dad had his own produce truck. We would move to a beach town during the summer because it got too hot in Riverside. My dad would buy a load of oranges or watermelons and take them into LA to sell. So on my birthday, August 6, a friend and I went in with my dad. Bert didn't go because he was too little.

We rode into LA on the truck, then took a streetcar to the Coliseum, paid our 50 cents and got into the Olympics. We sat at the end of the stadium and saw the sprint relay heats. We saw the steeple final, when the field ran an extra lap. My favorite runner then was Joe McCluskey, who ran 2nd all of the regular distance and ended up 3rd when it finished.

T&FN: So seeing all the great athletes and learning what the Olympics were about, did that fuel your fire for the sport?

Nelson: My interest was burning pretty brightly by then [laughs]. I had made up a game; we cut cardboard in the size of a playing card and put an athlete's name on it. There was a column for each event and down one side was the dice value, from 2 to 12. The values were based on their marks; a 12 was the athlete's PR. So you'd shake the dice and score that way.

Also remember laying out a track on butcher paper, with squares around it. Then you'd roll



One of Nelson's proud possessions is one of the few remaining copies of the first edition of *T&FN*.

athletes expected for the Games. I don't know where Max got his information, but he had more than everyone else. Or so it seemed to me, but then, I was only 13 at the time. But I still have a shoe box full of file cards that I made back then; I made a card for every good athlete and put all his marks on it.

the dice and move a marker—and once I ran a 10,000 like that, for 25 laps.

T&FN: *You and Bert saw NCAA meets after the Olympics, including Jesse Owens in '35?*

Nelson: Yes, we did. We went to the '34 NCAA in LA, the first ever on the West Coast, then the next year went to Berkeley. We rode the produce truck from Riverside to Stockton, which took about 18 hours. Then we hitchhiked to Oakland, then rode the streetcar to Berkeley. We didn't know the best route to the stadium, so we took a few more rides than we needed to. After the meet, we hitched back to Stockton and rode the produce truck home.

I sure remember Owens—I still feel he is the smoothest sprinter I've ever seen. You don't get much idea from the movies of those days of how smooth Owens really was.

T&FN: *What feelings have you had when you returned to those stadiums, like the LA Coliseum or Edwards Stadium in Berkeley, where you had such seminal experiences as a fan?*

Nelson: I loved doing it and that was one reason I enjoyed the '83 World Championships in Helsinki so much—because of the '52 Olympics. The more I think about it, and the more Olympics I see, the more I realize Helsinki was my favorite Games.

It was my first full Olympics, for one thing. But the competition was just special: Mal Whitfield vs. Arthur Wint in the 800; Josy Barthel of little Luxembourg winning the 1500; of course, Zátopek winning his 5/10/marathon triple.

And there was Horace Ashenfelter winning the steeplechase from this feared Russian. Of course, that was more than one guy beating his prime rival and big favorite: it was the U.S. vs. the USSR. It was fantastic how he blasted off that last water jump and ran away.

T&FN: *In terms of T&FN, its approach of ultra-accuracy led to many developments which are common today: place timing, results for every athlete, wind readings, field-event series. What else has the magazine contributed to the sport over the years?*

Nelson: I feel one of the biggest things is that the magazine is a focal point of success. Athletes think it's great to make the cover, or make a list or ranking. Some shoe companies actually pay bonuses based on the rankings.

I know that at least one Olympic champion credited the magazine with reviving his interest enough to keep competing that year—Guinn Smith, who won the '48 vault.

Also, athletes can see how they compare to the whole nation. High school athletes in North Dakota can get an idea what other high schoolers are doing around the country. Same for

collegians. There wasn't anything like that before.

T&FN: *Have there been negative, or less helpful, things that T&FN did?*



Of all the great head-to-head duels Nelson has ever seen, Powell over Lewis in the long jump at the '91 World Championships rates near the top of the list.

Nelson: The main thing is a story in the late-'60s which criticized the heck out of track coaches. That caused a lot of bitter feelings among coaches. They didn't blame just the writer, but the magazine, too. After all, we printed the story and I think the common perception is that a publication must agree with at least part of something it prints.

But from the start, we didn't believe in [sensationalism]. If we heard some bad stuff about an athlete, we didn't put it in, like writers seem to do today. We didn't feel that was what T&FN should be about. We took the correct position right from the start. I feel the term "high principled" fits our approach.

T&FN: *Another very positive aspect has been the World Rankings. How did that idea come up?*

Nelson: It just seemed like a good idea. It was a way to compare athletes from different

parts of the world, but for that first issue, it also was a way to sum up 1947.

T&FN: *The Rankings are such a cornerstone of T&FN's presence in the sport, but what other positive influences has the magazine had?*

Nelson: We did a lot about training in the early days. Fred Wilt introduced fartlek to this country. We wrote about interval training. I was more interested in training aspects than Bert. I'm sure we helped create fans. I've felt that the proliferation of "copycats"—regional publications and newsletters—shows we have had an impact.

T&FN: *Any event is so much more interesting when you know an athlete involved, like Mathias trying to defend his decathlon title in '52.*

Nelson: That applies to anything: the more you know about something, the more interesting it is. That's one of the problems with television: NBC really has tried to build personal interest, but it antagonizes track fans by showing all those bios.

I see what NBC is trying to do: make non-track fans interested in at least one athlete. A bio at least gives the casual fan something to watch. If you showed just the event, it would be like showing a swimming event to me. It doesn't mean anything to me; I just know who's ahead.

T&FN: *Do you more look forward to an Olympic or World Championships year, when you know you're virtually certain of being at the biggest meet of that season?*

Nelson: The first few Olympics I attended I felt were just about the biggest thing in life. There wasn't anything to compare with going to the Games. Now, I guess I'm jaded somewhat because I feel a bit of a letdown.

For years, I was hoping for World Championships because I wanted the Olympic experience more often than just once every four years. I still like that experience, but I also admit that those three World Records in 70 minutes this past year in Zürich got me a lot higher than the whole Worlds in Athens.

T&FN: *Can you say what has been the biggest change you've seen in the sport over the years? Is it just the progress in performances?*

Nelson: That part certainly has been remarkable. Now, tracks are much faster. And you have things like fiberglass poles, which have made the vault a different event from the old days. But the level of performances is just fantastic. We used to seriously publish 6-6 high jumps and 52-foot shot puts as national marks. Those were placers in national meets.

There have been things that have caused

radical changes that I don't like, drugs and money chief among them. I feel the worst thing in track now is drugs because we don't know if an athlete really is achieving a performance or not. A performance is suspect if it's anywhere near the top.

And I'm no Avery Brundage who wants absolute "pure" amateurism, but money is out of hand now. Many meets—indoors and outdoors—don't exist anymore but if they did, could they pay the athletes? Professionalism is good in some ways, but now it just seems that the balance is wrong. And I don't know how it ever will correct itself.

T&FN: Somehow, back in '52 or '56, was the sport more "pure"?

Nelson: In terms of amateurism, it definitely was. Would Jim Ryun today run for nothing? Everybody's getting paid, so why wouldn't he? But it was against the rules then.

But do you think Roger Bannister had money in mind when he ran? I bet Randy Matson didn't make any money. Do you think Prefontaine was as tough as he was because he saw dollar signs first? Athletes like Pre are the kind I admire.

T&FN: We'll ask in a minute about the highlight performances you have seen, but now what about outstanding individual athletes? You have seen many legends, like Owens and Zátopek.

Nelson: Oh, there have been so many great athletes. I did get to see Paavo Nurmi run once, but it wasn't a race. It was just before the U.S. got in World War II. He was touring for Finnish relief and he ran a lap on an indoor track in San Francisco. Then I also got to see him light the Olympic flame in '52.

I always had his picture in my bedroom when I was a kid. But now, I can't say who were the most outstanding athletes; there are so many good ones, it kind of boggles my mind now to try to name any.

T&FN: Have any performances you have seen been great disappointments or letdowns?

Nelson: Those mostly have been at the Trials. Matson getting knocked off the team by cigarette-smoking Brian Oldfield. Ryun falling at Munich; that was one of my big disappointments. Harrison Dillard hitting a hurdle at the '48 Trials; I was looking right at him when he fell and it was a shock because he was just supposed to win.

In those days, I thought I could predict results. If somebody was by far the best in the world, like

Dillard, then he was a cinch to make the Olympic team. I know better now.

T&FN: Finally, what are some of the most memorable performances you have seen?

Nelson: Anyone asks me the most exciting race I ever saw and I immediately think of Billy Mills's 10,000 at the Tokyo Olympics. One of the greatest I ever saw was the 400H at the '87 Worlds in Rome, that incredibly tight finish among Edwin Moses, Danny Harris and Harald Schmid.

There have been so many close races. Like the '84 Trials 100H, when four women all finished within a 100th. I doubt you could get one closer than that.

Once, I tried to analyze the excitement a race generates. First, it has to be something longer than 10 seconds, to develop that kind of

emotion. Then, it has to be an athlete I'm especially interested in, like Ashenfelter or [52 1500 runner-up] Bob McMillen or Mills or [10,000 AR setter] Max Truex in 1960.

Then the athlete has to do better than ever before, better than I ever thought he could do. Of course, it's icing on the cake if he wins. So Truex's 6th in Rome was very exciting to me, but in many newspaper references it was a failure because he placed only 6th. But he broke the AR by 45 seconds and beat a lot of big-name runners, so to me that was fantastic.

T&FN: Which women's races come to mind?

Nelson: I really enjoyed Mary Slaney at the '83 Worlds, with her kick. Since then, Boulmerka and Masterkova have had good kicks, but before Helsinki there weren't many kickers in women's races. To see Mary run like she did—like men—was great.

One of my proudest moments was watching the women's 10K in Barcelona when Derartu Tulu beat Elana Meyer. The field was together for half the race but even before they strung out, I said to [track nut] John Geer, "I like Tulu."

I hadn't heard of her, but she had a compact, efficient style. Tulu eventually ran away with the race and John said to me, "You know something about this sport, don't you?" [laughs]

T&FN: You obviously saw Beamon's long jump in '68—and Mike Powell vs. Carl Lewis when that was finally broken in '91?

Nelson: Yes. That was just an incredible back-and-forth competition between the two best in the world.

There have been a lot of very exciting field event World Records: Brian Sternberg's 16-8 vault in Compton; Charley Dumas's first 7-footer. That meet, the '56 Trials, was a great meet.

Another great one was Modesto in '63. That's where I saw two World Records at the same time. Oregon State won the 4 x 880 while Sternberg was tying the vault mark with 16-6³/₄.

Remember the women's javelin in Helsinki in '83? A Finn like Tiina Lillak coming through—on her last throw, in Finland, in the javelin, to win the World Championships. Even if you weren't Finnish, you got the electric feeling from the crowd.

There are so many memories... it's probably easiest to just look through years of T&FN. Flip a page and put your finger down. Almost everything is memorable.

Nelson thinks Slaney changed the face of women's running with aggressive kicks like she showed in Helsinki in '83.



DOON CHAOZ