

T&FN INTERVIEW

DAN O'BRIEN

by Jon Hendershott

What a difference a year has made for Dan O'Brien. At the end of 1990, the Idaho-based decathlete rated No. 4 in the world and was tabbed by some as the event's future star.

O'Brien's future arrived in 1991—a TAC win in the No. 2 score ever (8844w), the Tokyo Worlds gold medal in an AR 8812 and his first No. 1 global ranking.

His 10-event prowess helped lead the now-25-year-old O'Brien to a lucrative endorsement deal with Reebok—and "Dan & Dave" have become to sports advertising what Wayne and Garth have become to comedy.

The past year has been the literal learning experience for O'Brien, from starting to tap some of the vast athletic ability residing in his chiseled 6-2½/185 frame to coping with new and ever-increasing demands from the media and fans.

But he has become a fast learner. "We put the interviews and photo sessions on hold until the training is done," O'Brien says of the approach of coaches Mike Keller and Rick Sloan. Our talks were interspersed among at least a half-dozen other meetings with the media in less than a week.

O'Brien also has learned that, for better or

worse, some media still love to recount his wild younger days in college, when he was a party animal first and the decathlon virtually fell off his list of priorities.

But O'Brien's is a story of overcoming obstacles, whether salvaging his life and track career, or bouncing back from one disappointing decathlon event with a PR in the next.

He has learned patience, which helped when a sore ankle slowed his training in this crucial spring of an Olympic season (he is back to full-strength and full bore training now).

And O'Brien has learned that the decathlon is like life itself: there can be many ways to stumble or many ways to stand tall. His 10-event successes have allowed O'Brien to soar:

T&FN: After all that happened in '91 everybody wants his piece of Dan O'Brien. Has it been tough living with fame?

O'Brien: A little bit. I'd like to stay a little more obscured. I've been an underdog most of my career and I like to root for the underdog. I prefer to stay hidden. I work better that way.

T&FN: Was it "easier" when you were working to get to the top than it is now to

maintain the balancing act once you have reached the top?

O'Brien: It was easier to be hungrier last year. This year, many other things have come into play. Like, at this point, I know I can go out and score what I did last year.

So you think about other things: injuries, consistency; don't blow up in an event. There's a bit of a different mindset. But I'm still hungry for that World Record, plus making the team and winning the gold.

My goals were aimed just a little lower last year. But perspectives change as

"The Better You Get, The Harder Things Can Become."

you up the ante, and you get a little more nervous about it.

T&FN: Yet the realistic attitude is to always raise your sights, no?

O'Brien: Yes, but it's kind of tough. I always thought that the better I got, the easier things would get. But the better you get, the harder things can become.

More things come your way and responsibilities get larger. Your whole life changes, not just track & field.

T&FN: Is the striving for those ever-rising goals one major way you have changed, as an athlete and as a person, in the last couple of years?

O'Brien: Confidence is everything—and I'm very confident I can do well on the track. But I feel that my off-track life is what I've been working on the most.

I'm still putting the quality workouts into the sport. But I've also had to do things like learn to get organized and make more big decisions that involve my future. It can be tough, especially when you have let other people make those decisions for you for years. I find that those areas sometimes can be harder than the training part of it.

T&FN: Training is an area you're familiar with; you know how to operate in that world. Those other areas are new.

O'Brien: They really can be "one day at a time" situations. In training, you can say, "I'm going to do this for five months and I know where I'll be at the end of that time."

But somebody asks about some decision affecting my future and I say,

PR DECATHLON SCORE

Johnson Still A Threat

Azusa, California, April 23-24—Dan O'Brien may have supplanted Dave Johnson as the U.S.'s leading decathlete last year, but at the Mt. SAC multis Johnson indicated he isn't about to roll over and play dead.

The 29-year-old Azusa Pacific grad rolled up a big 8727 total on his home track. It was a PR by 127, and elevated him to No. 6 on the all-time world list and jumped him over Bruce Jenner to No. 2 American ever.

Johnson's score included a deca-windy long jump, but he also had a legal leap for a wind-ok total of 8705, still a PR.

Johnson parlayed four consecutive lifetime bests—including the first three events on day 2—into a second-day tally of 4411. That upped the closing-day record by 87 over Soviet Aleksandr Apaychev's '84 total of 4324.

"I looked at the meet as a workout. I trained through it," Johnson said. "I just wanted to finish an entire decathlon." He

had contested nine events at the late-March Willie Williams meet, compiling 7310 points.

"I started really hard training a couple of weeks before Azusa," added Johnson. "So I felt a big score could happen."

Johnson totaled 4316 with first-day performances of 10.96, 24-8¼w (24-4½ legal), 47-11¼, 6-8¼ and a PR 48.16. He extended his PR string on Day 2 with 14.17, 163-8 and 17-3¾ before closing with 219-8 and 4:29.38.

"It was funny, but I didn't feel like I was PRing in some events," Johnson said. "I was actually disappointed with the discus. I had been throwing much better in practice."

"But the vault was a big PR. That event was a lot of fun. But then the javelin, usually one of my best events, was a letdown. I used a new model jav and tried to throw too hard."

"Overall, my first three events weren't so good and there definitely are more points in the last two events. So I feel I can make a good attempt at 9000 points this year."

Johnson, hampered by a sore knee last year but fully healthy now, added, "That's the thing about the decathlon—you can always keep improving."

"Wow! I'm going to have to wait until I get there."

T&FN: How has Reebok's ad campaign that features you and Dave Johnson affected your life?

O'Brien: As far as track goes, there's a

little more pressure. I try not to feel it but every time I compete now, people expect great things. I feel some of that because the ads are being played up.

It's like that's what it took to rally everybody together. It seems like wherever I go now, I get support and that feels really good. Even though it's a bit of additional pressure, it's a good kind of pressure.

day. It's a motivating factor to me. Every day that I work, every week that goes by, I'm creating my future. If I accomplish the things I want to, I'm setting myself up for that future.

T&FN: In terms of decathlon training, what's the most difficult aspect: knowing what areas to emphasize, which to leave alone, when to ease off or bear down, what?

O'Brien: For me, the hardest part is keeping up with the physical demands. The overall conditioning of a decathlete is extremely difficult. You've got to be a 400 runner, and a sprinter, and a miler, at the same time you are a jumper and thrower. You're never going to find the exact balance.

I trust my coaches and we work on everything pretty equally. But physically and mentally, the hard workouts—the 500s and 800s and 1000s—they're tough. That's what I find the hardest.

T&FN: Is it tough mentally for any decathlete to compete so infrequently? Is maintaining your competitive edge a difficult aspect of the decathlon to master?

O'Brien: Probably a little. But I don't think you could do that many decathlons in one year, even if you wanted to. And the older you get, the tougher it is to put your body through it time and again.

Plus, I feel I'm not just a decathlete—I'm a track & field athlete. I can do a lot of varied events, so I get meets in every other weekend, and I spread around the events I do.

T&FN: You focus on yourself first. Yet knowing that Johnson is over 8700 now [see box], and Plaziat had a great indoor season, does that give you extra incentive in training?

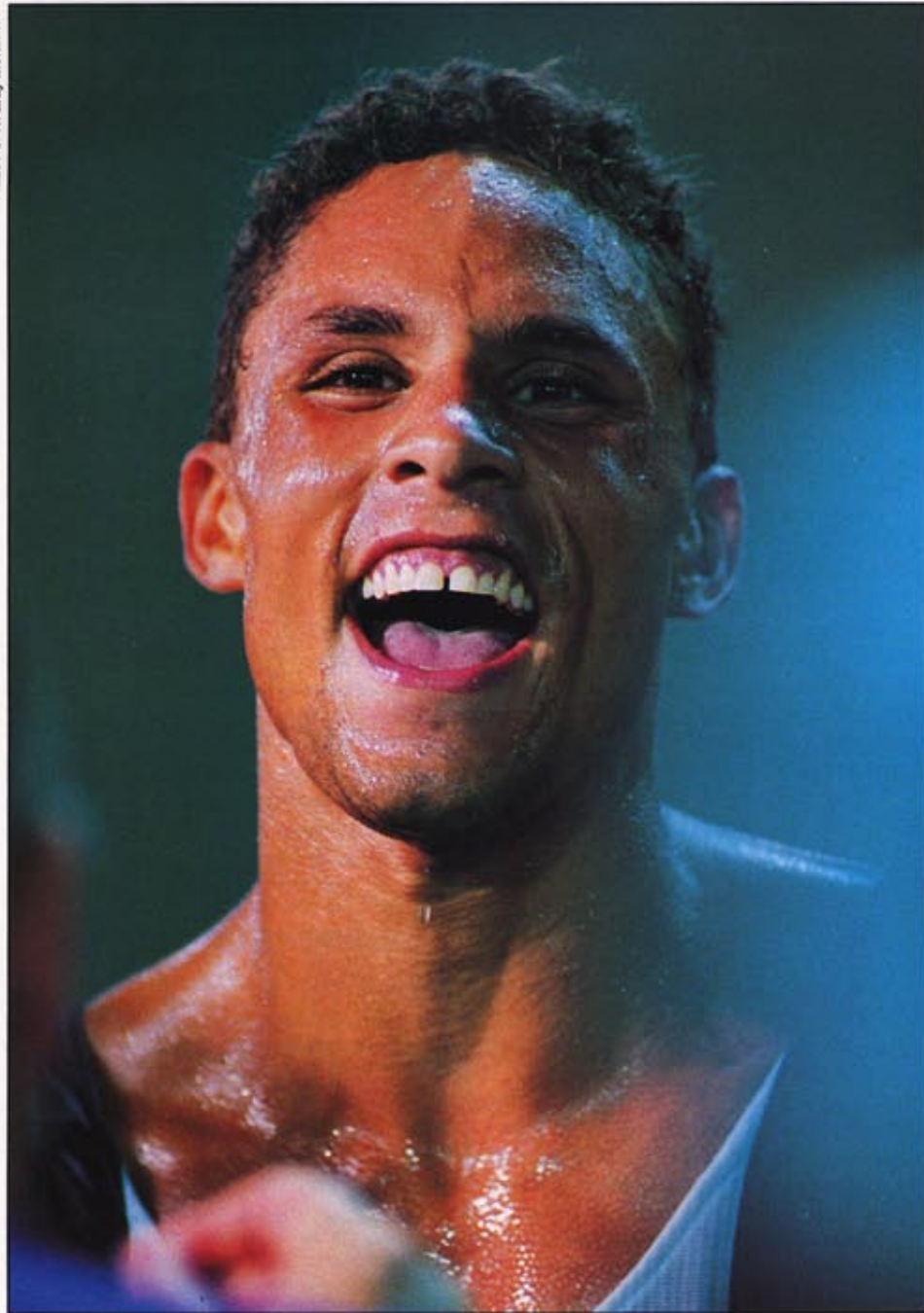
O'Brien: Oh yeah. I feel like I don't want to just win this thing; I want to achieve my goals—which could mean 9000 points, a World Record, whatever. If not this year, then next. I'm not putting everything into just this year.

T&FN: Is there one strongest memory you have from Tokyo?

O'Brien: There was one moment that was very key in the whole thing. Mike, Rick Sloan and I were together right before the 1500 and we always do a "team handshake" before competing.

We did one, then Keller and I both looked at Sloan and he was in tears. He said, "We're going to do it right here. World Record or not, everything we worked for all year is coming right here."

It was a very emotional moment. It just summed up the whole year: "Hey, this is what it's all about." But I also said



On the other hand, it's great to get that kind of support and backing from Reebok. I couldn't be more happy about how the campaign has been going and what it's done for Dave and me, for the

T&FN: "Good" in the sense that it can be a positive motivator? Or is pressure still just pressure?

O'Brien: Every now and then I wish I could go camping for a weekend and not have anybody know where I am or get any phone calls. [laughs]

That time will come, but now it all relates to the future. I think about it every

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DAN O'BRIEN — continued:

to Keller, "Get me away from this guy, or I'm gonna cry, too!"

T&FN: Any other recollections?

O'Brien: Something else that stands out now, especially with both the Trials and Barcelona coming up, is the feeling before the first events of both days.

So I think about, "What am I going to feel like in New Orleans, as I go into the competition?" It's easy to think back on Tokyo and recall the feelings before the start of the 100 or high hurdles.

Other great memories I do have from Tokyo are of just hanging out with the other athletes. That was almost as much fun as anything. Sitting in the stands with Hollis Conway and Jack Pierce, who was my roommate. Having dinner with Renaldo Nehemiah.

It was one of the first times I got to meet a lot of those people. So that was really enjoyable for me.

T&FN: So there you stood on top of the victory stand receiving the gold medal, the tangible reward for all your efforts. What went through your mind at that moment?

O'Brien: It's exciting to hear the cheers for you and when they call your name: "The gold medal winner, Dan O'Brien." It's definitely a thrill to be up there. But you've been through so much that you feel a little numb, too.

I had expended all my emotions while I competed. So it was a happy moment on the stand because it was all over then.

T&FN: Might 9000 be your "ultimate" score, or do you even think that way?

O'Brien: I feel my "ultimate" score would be even higher. But it definitely would be quite a feat to both be consistent and score that high.

Consistency is a big thing in the decathlon. If you can score 9000, it's because you were consistent throughout the competition. If I put my PRs together, I'd score more than 92 and that's unreal.

T&FN: Well, your in-decathlon PRs add to 9140 and all-time best marks total 9304. Those are space-age scores, but not terribly outlandish.

O'Brien: No, I don't feel they are, because I've gotten a lot of my all-time PRs in decathlons.

T&FN: Do you ever tire of hearing about scoring 9000 points?

O'Brien: No, I don't. Not until I do it will I get tired of hearing about it. I feel it's very possible. Ideally, I'd love to break the World Record by one point in New Orleans, then hit 9000 in Barcelona.

I also feel if I shoot for 9000 then for sure I'll get the record, even if it comes up short of 9000. And if I shoot for 9200, then maybe I'll get that 9000.

T&FN: At this point in your life, has the decathlon "become" Dan O'Brien, and vice versa?

O'Brien: Oh definitely. It's a living thing every day—you have to live it to be good at it. I definitely live it every day, and think about it every day, and think about Barcelona every day.

What I sometimes forget is that I'm only 25 years old. Sometimes I think this is the end of the road, but then I realize, "No, it's not. I've got a long way to go."

T&FN: Yes, you're only 25 and you do have a long future in both the decathlon and track itself. But have you considered where in the future you might channel the dedication you now give the decathlon?

O'Brien: I feel that something good I could do is give motivational lectures, especially to young people. I'd like to be an integral part of helping to clean up areas of rough youth.

T&FN: You can use your own life as an example to kids: "I was on the brink of really losing it but I straightened myself out and you can do it too."

O'Brien: I definitely feel you can do that. Let them know, "The decision is yours. People will tell you a lot of things, but you have to decide."

It was the same for me—in life, in track and in the decathlon. It didn't happen until I made the decision. Me, the man in the mirror. □

O'BRIEN'S PROGRESSION

Dan Doin O'Brien was born July 18, 1966, in Portland, Oregon, and is 6-2 1/2/185. Graduated from Henley HS in Klamath Falls, Oregon, in '84. Competed for Spokane Community College in '88 and Idaho in '89. Currently represents Reebok.

Decathlon PRs: 100—10.40 ('90)/10.23w ('91); LJ—26-4 1/2 ('90); SP—53-3 1/2 ('91); HJ—6-11 1/4 ('90); 400—46.53 ('91); 110H—13.94 ('91); DT—157-9 ('91); PV—17-3/4 ('91); JT—199-0 ('91); 1500—4:33.19 ('89).

Other PRs, where different: 110H—13.81w ('90); HJ—7-11 ('92); LJ—26-7 1/4 w ('91); DT—173-6 ('90); Dec—8812 AR/8844w ('91). His deca bests add up to 9140 (4884/4256); with the inclusion of his open PRs, those numbers soar to 9304 (4930/4374).

Progression (World & U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Yr	Age	Dec	Majors
'82	15/16	5583h	—
'83	16/17	6438h	—
'84	17/18	6882h	4)TAC Jr
'85	18/19	—	—
'86	19/20	did not compete	—
'87	20/21	did not compete	—
'88	21/22	7891	dnf)OT
'89	22/23	7987 (x, 10)	—
'90	23/24	8483w (4, 2)	2)TAC
'91	24/25	8844w (1, 1)	1)TAC, 1)WC

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