

# DAN RIPLEY

by Jon Hendershott

**E**ighteen months ago, Dan Ripley was just another pole vaulter, with a best in competition of 16-3/4. Two vaults during the '75 indoor season changed all that—but quick.

Suddenly he was "Believe It Or Not" Ripley, the San Jose State senior who climbed 17-9 and then an amateur indoor record 18-1 in consecutive meets. He overcame nagging injuries to compile a fine outdoor season, highlighted by another 18-1 for second in the NCAA, to rank fifth in the world. In six months, Dan Ripley became an international force in the vault.

This past indoor season was another Ripley showcase—three raisings of the indoor record, finally to 18-3/4 which beat last year's leader Wladyslaw Kozakiewicz of Poland and '75's top American Earl Bell. Ripley's season helped rank him third in Indoor Athlete of the Year voting.

The 22-year-old (10/7/53) Pacific Coast Clubber has come a long way in the past 18 months. He is still easy-going off the runway and like a caged tiger on it. But he now has more experience, more understanding of the ins and outs of top-level competition and is trying to keep a realistic attitude about the Olympic Games.

Sure, he wants to make that team as much as anyone else. So he is training at home in southern California, he is helping out at Cypress College, the junior college he attended, and he is trying to keep the Olympic Games in perspective. After all, it is just a track meet.

**T&FN:** The PCC is supposed to compete in a few European meets before Montreal, but Montreal really will be your first full-scale, big-time international competition on a US team. How does that prospect sound to you?

**Ripley:** Well, if I can make our team, it should be okay. I'm sure there will be some things I don't expect. There always is, but hopefully I'll be able to handle those.

A track meet, big meet or not, pretty much comes down to the same thing. When you get on the runway, it's just you. Obviously in any big meet you'll be trying harder, but in any meet what's important is you. I think everything else becomes immaterial at that point.

**T&FN:** So what will you be concentrating on?

**Ripley:** I'll concentrate on my technique before I vault and on what I'm there to do.

**T&FN:** It would seem that concentration is super important in the biggest meet and one you've never been in before.

**Ripley:** Well, that's one thing, you know. They're special, but they're not that special. It's still a track meet and no more than that. I mean what is a track meet? Sure it's the biggest one but it isn't

something out of sight. It's still real and basically what it comes down to is that it's still a meet. It's a big thing and people have made it a big thing, but it's still a track meet and you can't make it any more than that. You want to do your best, but beyond that you can't worry.

**T&FN:** Might it be a disadvantage not to have competed at the big-time international level?

**Ripley:** Hmm, I doubt it. I competed against the top vaulters indoors and the Olympics really just come down to who is the best vaulter. If I was one of those who make more of it than it is, then not having a lot of international competition might hurt me. I could get there and think "Hey, this is the Olympics. Wow." But I don't believe that. To me, it's just a meet where you see who is the best vaulter, at least on that day, and that's all there is to it.

**T&FN:** Did you learn things from competing against the Poles and other foreigners indoors this winter?

**Ripley:** It was a good experience. It sure pushed the heights up. I had chances to compete against the best vaulters and that never hurts anything. I know I profited from it. But I jumped harder at the end of the indoor season than I had planned.

**T&FN:** In looking back, how do you consider your marks of '75? They were your real break-through marks that put you in the international picture.

**Ripley:** Well both 18-1s were good, but I think I was vaulting at a better level this year. I made 18-feet more consistently.

**T&FN:** It was all a new experience last year, too.

**Ripley:** Yeah, it was a big deal then. This year I was getting more used to the feel of it. Your first indoor meets can really affect you; it's so unfamiliar and seems so important. In the beginning, I was really nervous before a meet—like starting a week before—so by the time I walked out on the floor I was just plain scared.

Now I know I was putting a lot of pressure on myself, thinking I had to do well. You want to do well, sure, and to some extent you have to, to prove yourself. But sometimes you put too much pressure on yourself, more than what's good for you. Now it's more fun and less pressuresome. The pressure is still there but you know how to handle it.

**T&FN:** So what are your reactions to your marks this indoor season?

**Ripley:** Well I didn't expect to jump

that high. Really, I didn't know how high I was going to jump. I thought I could get maybe 18-2 or a fraction over. But 18-3/4, well I didn't think I would have to jump that high and I didn't think I would be able to.

**T&FN:** How would you say you have changed between those sets of indoor records?

**Ripley:** I think I'm more realistic. I have more experience so I know more about the little things it takes to compete successfully. I have a better attitude towards competition: I'm doing it more comfortably and not putting so much pressure on myself. I'm getting closer to putting the right amount of pressure on myself. Competing is more enjoyable. It always was enjoyable, but it's more so now because I'm not so overly concerned with how I'm going to do. Then, I'm jumping higher too—and that sure doesn't hurt anything.

**T&FN:** You said after your first 18-1 last year that 18-5/4, then the world record, was pretty high. Do you still feel that way, or is the world record an obtainable height?

**Ripley:** Oh, 18-5/4 is high. It's only two inches higher than my best and 18-6/2 isn't that much higher. If I make that, I'll probably say it isn't that high, but right now it's higher than anything I've made.

**T&FN:** Do you have to do things that much differently to jump three inches higher? Jumping three inches higher than your best would give you the outdoor world record.

**Ripley:** I think it depends on how high you made the jump three inches below that. If you made that lower jump by five or six inches, then it probably wouldn't be that much of a strain. But if you scraped it and it's a once-in-a-lifetime vault, then you're going to have to do a lot of different things to go higher.

Besides better technique, there are two ways you can go higher—raise your grip or use a stiffer pole with the same grip. If a guy can do either one successfully, he should vault higher. If he can raise his grip three inches and still vault the same way, that's the difference right there. It depends if he has maxed out in his technique, or grip, or on his pole. If he has reached the limit on all three, it's going to be very difficult for him to go higher. Hopefully, I haven't neared my limit on all three.

**T&FN:** After you emerged last year, did you feel pressure to always jump high?

**Ripley:** Yeah, I did. There's also been having to adjust to some of that. Everyone expected certain things and it was a little hard to adjust to. You let somebody else put pressure on you and it just adds to what you put on yourself.

**T&FN:** Does it help to be out of college and perhaps not feel that?

**Ripley:** One thing I like about being out of college is that you don't have to be really ready for those dual meets. You're not forced to be in good form and good



technique in the early part of the outdoor season. I liked college and competing for the college team, but I like this better. The invitationals are important, sure, but if you want to progress at your own rate, then you don't have to be jumping your best early in the spring.

**T&FN:** *Eighteen months ago your best in competition was 16-3/4. What would you say all of your improvement has meant to you?*

**Ripley:** In dollars and cents?

**T&FN:** *I'm going to print that.*

**Ripley:** Really, it's satisfying to have jumped as high as I have. I've worked a long time and to be up at the top is really nice. I always thought I could do it; I guess everyone does. I looked forward to jumping with the top vaulters and always hoped, in the back of my mind, that I could be there too. It's more fun jumping higher and it's fun to win. They go together I guess. You feel like you have worked closer to your potential and that's satisfying.

**T&FN:** *What do you think your potential is?*

**Ripley:** I don't know. I hope it's higher than 18-3/4. I'm not much of one to predict. I'm sure in my own mind I know what I would like to achieve. I won't say what that is—until after I do it. But I know it must be higher than 18-3/4.

**T&FN:** *Has being in the PCC been good for you?*

**Ripley:** Definitely. I've gotten into a lot of big meets indoors because of the PCC.

**T&FN:** *It's put you in a higher tax bracket, too. That's my one-liner for the day.*

**Ripley:** Well... really, I think it almost goes without saying that the PCC is the best-run, best-organized track club in the US. I have nothing but praise for Tom Jennings and the club in general. I'm glad I joined the PCC.

There are so many things. People on the team know a lot about competition, competing at the top level. It sure has helped me. Doing it by myself would have been a lot harder. It would have taken me a lot longer to learn what was going on.

**T&FN:** *So Jennings may not be a real technical coach, but he may help by better preparing you psychologically?*

**Ripley:** I think so. You learn attitudes about competition. I've been given the chance to view many top-level athletes and how they view competition and how they go about it. You get to see athletes enjoy competition, not so much a do-or-die attitude. But you don't come in knowing everything. You have to learn. So it's been very valuable in that way.

**T&FN:** *Jennings once said he doesn't change athletes, he lets them develop into what they really are. At the least, he seems to instill a strong self-confidence in his athletes.*

**Ripley:** There is some point in there that is right for each guy. Tom has seen a

lot of good athletes through the years and probably has a real good idea of what is the most beneficial attitude. Psychologically, I think he probably helps as much as anyone could.

A coach can only do so much. Mentally, if a guy isn't a strong competitor, a coach can't make him something else. Something out of nothing, let's say. I think a coach helps an athlete increase the percentage of his own ability that he uses, both mental and physical. Athletes at the level of the members of the PCC need more of the mental aspect than the physical coaching and Tom is good in that way.

**T&FN:** *When you are in the arena, you're very intense about the competition and losing seems totally unacceptable to you. It seems like that is one of those self-imposed pressures.*

**Ripley:** Well, I would much rather win. I do think there is a point where you can put too much pressure on yourself, just as there is a point where you don't put enough. Trying too hard or not trying hard enough. Sometimes it's hard to reach that middle ground but that's what I strive for. I don't know how close I come. I try not to be overly concerned about it. I try to go out there and have a certain amount of fun, besides competing as well as I can.

**T&FN:** *Somebody once said that the high jump and vault were the only two events which end in failure because you might clear a world record but then miss all three shots at the next height.*

**Ripley:** Hey, I've never done it. I've never attempted higher than my record, so I don't know.

**T&FN:** *Okay, how about going from 18-3/4 in New York one night to no-heighting at 17-0 in San Diego the next night? Does that bother you?*

**Ripley:** No, that doesn't bother me that much, especially that instance. The three meets before San Diego I jumped as high as I ever had, so by San Diego I was pressing. Plus I had only my stiffest poles, I was tired and my leg hurt a little. With the stiff poles I just couldn't get any penetration toward the bar. What I needed was a lighter pole. I figured it was just one of those things.

**T&FN:** *How much difference in the event do poles make?*

**Ripley:** An awful lot. If you feel good and you're on, if you're physically fast and not tired and you use a big pole and hold high, it makes quite a difference. If you're tired, though, and use that same pole, you won't even get into the pit. Or vice versa: if you don't have a big enough pole, then you aren't going to get as much as you could. So it's a crucial factor. The right one makes all the difference.

**T&FN:** *Are you at the stage of your knowledge of the vault and technique development that you can use meets as vault training?*

**Ripley:** Oh yeah. I don't vault much in practice, like I used to. I don't feel it's necessary. I feel I can do just as well by

lifting and keeping in good overall condition.

**T&FN:** *What is the best vault you have ever made?*

**Ripley:** Oh the 18-3/4 by far. Hey, oooh! That was the best vault of my life, no doubt. Good clearance. It was shocking to me. It was as high as I've ever been over any 18-foot vault. And it was a record besides.

**T&FN:** *Who do you feel is the best technician you have seen?*

**Ripley:** Kozakiewicz. He is good, looks good and smooth.

Earl Bell is good too. He's been vaulting a little under his level, I think, but he's getting closer. That's why he's been able to compete well. He'll compete most of the season vaulting at a level which is very easy for him. Actually he is a better vaulter than that level and then when he gets in a big meet he is able to go higher.

**T&FN:** *Which jumpers do you consider the big competition for Montreal?*

**Ripley:** Kozakiewicz is obviously good. He proved that when he was here indoors. Bell will be there. Aw, there are a lot of guys, especially the Americans. One of the top guys may not even make it, which is typical of the vault. It's such a flaky thing. But I don't see anybody else who has been that consistently good.

**T&FN:** *How important is it to you to make the team?*

**Ripley:** Hmm... well, I'd sure like to make it.

**T&FN:** *What do you think the likelihood of the vault might be? What might affect progress in the event?*

**Ripley:** I think we're getting to the point now where equipment might be a big thing. I don't see any big changes coming in equipment, from an engineering standpoint. I don't see any other materials which are all of a sudden going to become better than fiberglass. Equipment is going to be the big limitation, I think. Then there are the natural physical limitations of the athlete.

But there's been a nice progression in the event since we started using fiberglass. I think we're heading toward the time when records will be harder to come by. It will be just like any other event. There will be improvements in the records. But I think we're getting to the point where it's getting tougher all the time.

**T&FN:** *Is 19-feet that far off?*

**Ripley:** I thought for a while that it was, but now I'm not so sure. Surely it will be an excellent vault, probably one that will be out there by itself for a good while.

Then again, the way all these guys are vaulting today, who knows when it might come? It's sort of scary, there are so many people who could. But they haven't yet.

If it can be done, I think it might happen this year. This is when everybody will be trying their hardest. Like I said, there will be improvements. I like improvements—especially when I make them. □