

Dave Johnson

by Jeff Hollobaugh

Dave Johnson is back, and just in time for his Olympic decathlon buildup. The casual track fan last saw the cleft-chinned, All-American-type grimacing to finish the 1500 in the Barcelona Olympics, overcoming a painful double fracture in his ankle to win the bronze.

Twenty-nine years-old then, Johnson could have easily faded away. But it's hard to give up when you know that healthy, you might have won.

So he had the navicular fractures repaired and returned to training. He lost all of '93 to his rehabilitation effort, with much of his time devoted to the writing of his autobiography, *Aim High: An Olympic Decathlete's Inspiring Story*. He trained through a mixed '94 campaign, scoring 8219 early, slipping to 16th at nationals, and undergoing fall knee surgery.

Now healthy and training hard, Johnson is focused on the gold that eluded him in Barcelona. But he has more on his mind as well, as wife Sheri gave birth to daughter Mackensie in late April.

"Today is the first doctor's appointment for our new baby," explained Johnson as we interviewed him, "so I'm taking the day off and going to make sure that my kid's okay."

Unabashed in his religious faith and his devotion to family, Johnson adds as explanation: "The true meaning in life is kids."

T&FN: Your 8322 at Mt. SAC is your highest score since the '92 Olympic Trials—does that bode well for your season?

Johnson: I'm at that step I need to be on—plan to be on—until the Olympics. I feel great, my training's going well, and I think I'm on a pace that will put me in the medal running for next year.

T&FN: Is '95 a big season in itself, or do you view it as a prelude to '96?

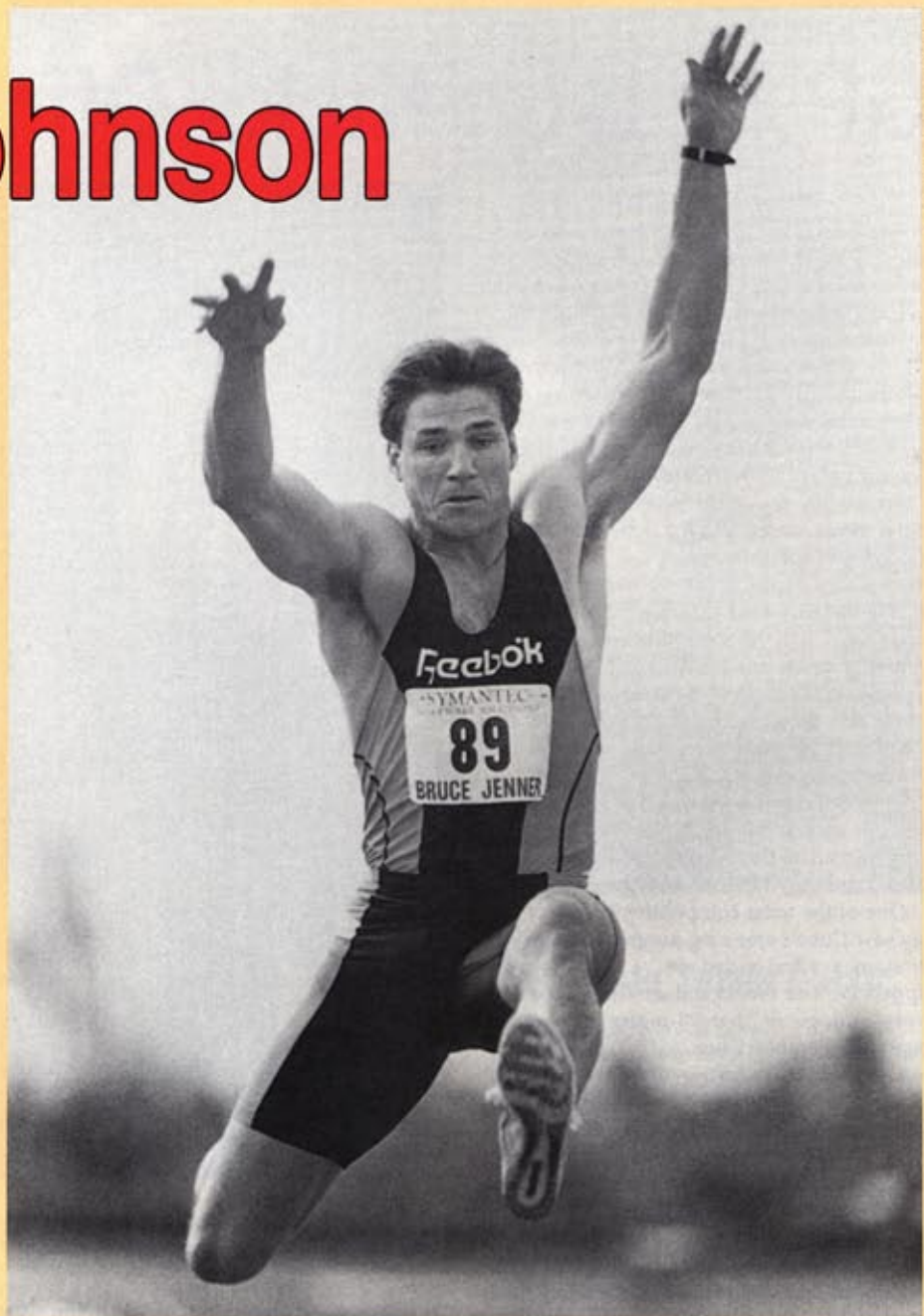
Johnson: The World Championships is going to be a fun meet this year, but I'm not really putting a lot of importance on it in my training. The biggest meet I need to train for now is the Olympic Games. I'm planning to pace myself to be at my best there; that's when it's going to be most important for my career. If this is a good training year, that gets me ready for next year.

T&FN: With all of your experience, do you know exactly what you need to get to the Olympics again?

Johnson: I do. I've got it all around me—this university where I've been training since 1983. I've got it all down on paper and I've got it all in my mind. I know exactly what it will take to get ready to do well. Now I've just got to get ready to pay the price of a little bit of pain for it.

T&FN: Is there more of that pain these days?

Johnson: It takes a little longer to recover. That's the only thing I'm noticing. My right ankle feels a little bit sore still because there are



Michael P. Voudouris/Photo Run

pins in the bone. It's a little bit arthritic, but once I start running, I don't feel anything at all in my ankles. I had surgery on my right knee in November, and that still feels a little sore once in a while, but these are all little aches and pains. Once I get warmed up a little bit, they go away. To feel a little bit of pain when I'm warming up and have it go away when I'm running, it gives me that much more confidence.

T&FN: In the flurry of media coverage you and Dan got in '92, you seemed to be typecast as "the reformed bad boy turned Christian." Did that characterization ring true for you?

Johnson: The world tries to find anything it can just to make a story out of a situation. But there's no way a story can be just as deep as a person really is. So those are parts of me. I accepted that those were parts of me that were being let out into the public. They were definitely true. I was a troubled youth that fortu-

nately got out of trouble and found a purpose in his life, and that became Jesus Christ. I've tried to lead my life in the way Jesus Christ would have me.

That's all true, but there's a lot more to Dave Johnson than those few things, a lot more to Dave Johnson than just the decathlon. But the base of Dave Johnson is finding Jesus Christ in his life and changing from a life of crime to a life of giving that same energy to the decathlon.

T&FN: Were you successful in track early on?

Johnson: No. . . well, in the mile relay, I ended up running like a 52 split. Not bad for a senior in high school who didn't run much. We went to state in the mile relay and took 4th. It felt pretty good to do that well. Individually, I didn't go to state.

T&FN: How many college recruiters came after you?

Johnson: One. Just one. It was a junior

college coach, Dave Bakley, who first said that word "decathlon" to me. I ended up going there my sophomore year, to Linn-Benton CC. He called me up and said, "Hey, come out to Linn-Benton and do the decathlon."

"I said, 'Bruce Jenner. . . that's the guy on *Chips*.' I really had no concept of what the decathlon was."

I thought he said "marathon." I honestly said, "I cannot run that far. I can't do that."

He said, "No, *decathlon*—you know, Bruce Jenner, '76, won the gold medal?"

And I said, "Bruce Jenner. . . that's the guy on *Chips*." I really had no concept of what the decathlon was or even the Olympics, so it's a good thing that he said those words to me.

That's exactly what I had in mind when I went to Western Oregon my freshman year—to try the decathlon and see what happened. I broke the school freshman record in the decathlon. I started to figure that this decathlon thing was something that I could do well at.

I ended up running for Bakley my sophomore year and he was the perfect coach to nurture the decathlon in me. I improved 1000 points when he got ahold of me.

T&FN: Was Azusa another turning point?

Johnson: Definitely—finding a family of people that encouraged me to be the best I could be for the Lord. It was a Christian college. I learned to be an ambassador for the Lord. I was a good athlete going in but they didn't overdo the athlete side of me. They let me see my potential as a Christian first.

As soon as I found I had a purpose, it gave me more confidence in the decathlon. It didn't take long. My first year there I scored 8043. And that was the 6th deca of my life. It led me to the Olympic Trials in '84. Azusa Pacific nurtured that dream that I had of being one of the best athletes in the world. Without that school, I don't think it would have happened.

T&FN: You've been working out at Azusa for more than a decade. You must think highly of your coaching support system.

Johnson: It's the best. I have the same coach that I worked with at Azusa, Terry Franson. Kevin Reid is an assistant there; he still works with me to make sure I'm on pace. The workouts I do every year, I just try to keep doing. They make sure that I don't try to do too much.

I've been doing a little bit of long jump work with Randy Huntington and a little sprint stuff with Don Quarrie. That's basically where I'm at right now. I'm thinking of going out and doing a little bit of vault training with Dean Starkey up in San Luis Obispo. I like to go out and vault with the Fraleys in Fresno once in a while. But other than that, I'm still at home and training my booty off at Azusa.

T&FN: Describe a typical training day.

Johnson: The first thing I do is get up with Alexandra—she's 2½ now—have breakfast, and goof off, play on the trampoline, whatever. At 10, I go to where I've had therapy on my knee and my ankles through the years. I do a little warmup on a bike and stretch out. If anything's ailing me, those guys work on that part of my body, but most of the time I'm just stretching out. At about 11:30, I go over to Azusa, have lunch with the coaches, and then by 1:00 I'm at the track.

I warm up and work on two—sometimes three—events a day, and then do a running workout and lift weights. At 6:30 or 7:00, I'm going home just as fast as I can to be with my wife and kids. That's 4 days a week. Wednesdays I take off—I just warm up and stretch. Sundays, I take off. On Saturdays usually there's a meet here in L.A. I'll go out and do one or two events and then run a mile relay. If there's not a meet I would do a full training day on a Saturday.

T&FN: What do you do on an off-day?

Johnson: Mostly I just spend time with my wife and kids. We go to a movie or something like that. In the off-season, when I'm not training as much for the decathlon, we do a lot of mountain biking and golf.

Plus, I take correspondence classes. I want to eventually do something else with my life. Sports psychology and marriage/family counseling is the direction I want to take. It's hard right now with all the training and the two kids. I can only take one class every once in a while.

After the Olympics, I'm definitely going to retire from the decathlon. I might just throw the javelin for the fun of it. I'll still be in school, getting my masters degrees. I'll need something else to do besides biking and golf.

T&FN: How competitive are you?

Johnson: Pretty competitive [laughs]. I've learned to do things as Christ would. So I try to give 100% of myself, as He did. I mean, He died on the cross—that's 100%, no doubt about it. When I give 100%, the outcome is always a winning situation. It's a very hard thing to give 100%, and ultimately, it's all for someone else.

T&FN: Do you find that same competitiveness in other areas of your life?

Johnson: Yeah, because I've learned to always be aggressive. It carries over to when I'm driving on the freeway. I want to be in front of every car that I see. It's a very tense situation. I've got to calm myself down or I end up getting a ticket. When I mountain bike or golf, there's a competitive side. I want to beat the guy next to me.

But the major competitor in Dave Johnson comes out when I'm on the track doing the decathlon. When there's points to

be had, that's when the most courageous guy comes out in me.

T&FN: After all your years of training, is the hard work starting to wear on you?

Johnson: It's wearing on the body a little bit, but I'm still fresh mentally. I feel like I have the skill. I feel confident with the experience I've gained over those 10 years.

T&FN: In athletic terms, what do you fear most?

Johnson: I guess I fear injury again at the Olympic Games. I don't want to have a major injury that I have to run through. That hurt a lot in '92. I don't want to have another painful experience. These are all things that happen in life. Fortunately, I do depend upon something that is stronger than me, that is stronger than anything. Even though there's fear in my life, I still have something that doesn't fear anything.

T&FN: To this point, has your career left you with any regrets?

Johnson: None whatsoever. My career wasn't always exactly what I've wanted it to be, but it wasn't anything I didn't want it to be. There are definitely no regrets. I've enjoyed everything. I'll enjoy the next year and walk away from the decathlon as a success, as a mountain climber, and be able to look down on it seeing a lot of experiences that have propelled me to the next mountains I have to climb.

T&FN: Say that disaster strikes you in the next Olympics; can you live with that?

Johnson: Oh yeah, no doubt about it. I've been at two Olympics, I've won a medal, and I'm set up to do whatever I want to do afterwards. I've done well. I'm prepared to go on and climb another mountain. I'll definitely be able to live with myself. I'll be discouraged, I'll have the feeling of something taken away, but

JOHNSON IN A NUTSHELL

David A. Johnson was born April 7, 1963, in Missoula, Montana, and is 6-3/200. Graduated from Crescent Valley HS (Corvallis, Oregon) in '81. Now coached by Mike Keller and Rick Sloan.

PRs (with all-time list positions in parentheses): 100—10.79 ('89); 400—48.19 ('91); 1500—4:23.00 ('91); 110H—14.17 ('91); HJ—6-10⁹/₂.10 ('90); PV—17-4/5.28 ('91); JT—244-8/74.58 ('92); Dec—8727w (7, x W; 2, 5 A).

Major Meets: JT—8)USA, 4)OF ('93).

Dec—11)OT/USA ('84); 4)USA, 5)OF ('85); 1)USA, 1)OF ('86); dnf)USA ('87); 3)OT, 9)OG ('88); 1)USA, 1)WUG ('89); 1)USA ('90); 2)USA, dnf)OF, 21)WC ('91); 1)OT, 3)OG ('92); 16)USA ('94).

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

Year	Age	Affiliation	Javelin	Decathlon
'82	19	Wn Oregon Fr	—	6297h
'83	20	Linn-Benton So	177-0/53.96	7225h
'84	21	Azusa Pacific Jr	237-2/72.30	8043h
'85	22	Azusa Pacific Sr	243-0/74.06	7948 (x, 5)
'86	23	New York AC	218-4/66.56	8203w (x, 2)
'87	24	New York AC	210-4/64.12	8045 (x, 8)
'88	25	New York AC	223-10/68.22	8245 (x, 3)
'89	26	New York AC	229-5/69.94	8549 (2, 1)
'90	27	Nike International	225-3/68.66	8600w (2, 1)
'91	28	Reebok	236-9/72.16	8467 (8, 2)
'92	29	Reebok	244-8/74.58	8727w (4, 2)
'93	30	Reebok	230-3/70.18 (x, 9)	—
'94	31	Reebok	234-1/71.36	8219 (x, 6)
'95	32	Reebok	228-5/69.62	8322

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JOHNSON INTERVIEW — cont:

reason than me.

T&FN: Much has been made of your rivalry with Dan O'Brien. How would you characterize the relationship?

Johnson: We do a lot of things together: VISA Decathlon team events, speaking engagements, autograph parties. We're good friends. We've come through a lot together. We've known each other since '87. I feel like he's a brother. We're going to be buddies for the rest of our lives. It will be fun to look back at it after we're done, sit down and have a Coke and say, "Hey, look what we did."

T&FN: Who else impresses you?

Johnson: Steve Fritz is looking tough. He's got a lot of potential to score a lot of points. Kip Janvrin is improving every year. Aric Long has a lot of potential, too. They will have to learn to compete well at the Olympic Trials. You can score 8500 points in between the Olympics, but you've got to be sure you are one of the guys who makes the team.

T&FN: There's been a boom in the boom in the decathlon in the U.S.—do you have mixed feelings that your competition is deeper?

Johnson: No. It's driven me to score more points. If I see these younger kids doing well in their decathlon and training, I've got to do it too. It makes me train harder, it makes me train smarter and it just makes my career be that much better. It is an inspiration.

T&FN: Do you think you've reached your potential?

Johnson: I hope not. I find right now with my training, I can definitely PR in all the throws, I can PR in the vault. I feel things I've never really felt before. I guess experience brings about that. I can PR in the 1500. There's five events there where I can do better than I ever have before.

The only ones where I don't really feel like I might do better are the 100m; the LJ is close, but you've got to have the speed; the HJ is getting close, I've jumped 6-11, which isn't too far out of reach, but it's not very high still. But all the other events, it feels like there's a technical side of me that's making me better than I've ever been before. If that all happens like it feels like it can, I think I can score 8800-8900 points pretty easily.

T&FN: The O'Brien camp keeps mentioning potential scores of 9000-9200. Is your hope that at the Olympics, that high a score might not be needed?

Johnson: You're right. My philosophy has always been to be as prepared as possible for whatever opportunity is there. I look at the Olympics as a big opportunity for me personally to be at my best at the right time. I'm going to set my goals for that, so that I'm at my best without injury.

Keep in mind that it might not take 8800-8900 points or a World Record to win the Olympics. My concern is to get the most out of myself in that situation. In my mind, the most of myself is going to be 8800 points or more. I want to be able to leave the decathlon and know that I've given it everything I have. □

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