



DEBBIE BRILL

Paul Sutton/Duomo

In earlier times she might have been called a bohemian, or a beatnik, or a hippie. Perhaps "free spirit" is best, as Debbie Brill operates largely unfettered by the bonds of society, just as she often seems to defy gravity as she soars over the high jump bar.

A prodigy who became the first North American woman to clear 6-feet, the Canadian star has pursued a less-than-conventional lifestyle. After her first Olympics she became the quintessential dropout, leading a nomadic life and experimenting with drugs. One of the lucky ones, she tired of that existence and wandered back to track.

By the end of the '70s she was again among the world's best, ranking No. 1 in 1979 and setting a short-lived WR of 6-6¼ indoors this winter.

Nonetheless, she maintains her fierce independence. The proud mother of a 6-month-old boy, Neil Bogart Ray, she shuns the institution of marriage and all its "phony trappings," and opts instead simply to continue to live with long-time companion Greg Ray, her son's father.

The most devoted of mothers, Debbie relaxed in the author's sunporch after the San Francisco Games, his dog amusing "Bogie," as she sipped her champagne and talked of life:

T&FN: One way you can tell a lot about people is by what they read. What would I find if I looked on your bookshelf?

Brill: Mostly, you'd find things that I want to know. I read a fair amount of philosophy.

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by Garry Hill

T&FN: The "heavy" philosophers? Kierkegaard, Sartre?

Brill: I've read them; our "beloved" Dostoevskiy. I don't read much fiction. When I was a kid I used to read fairytales. I love that kind of sense of the world, but now I read for things I want to know.

T&FN: What do you want to know?

Brill: I guess I'm interested in my own responses to things and in other peoples' responses to things. I suppose that's what philosophy is. How you deal with the world; how you deal with people around you. I want to know the whys behind a lot of things.

T&FN: What is your basic philosophy?

Brill: I don't want to live one way and believe something else. I want to be able to live as I believe. I want to be able to enjoy and understand the way I'm living.

High jumping is real fun. I'm enjoying it and it's great, but it's not central; it's peripheral. If the rest of my life is going well, then I high jump really well. But if it's not...

T&FN: Wouldn't you miss the travel, the people?

Brill: I figure I can travel any time I

want. When I don't have money I can travel by hitchhiking. If I've got money I'll travel wherever I want. It doesn't make that much difference.

I don't have a lot of close friends in track. You have to be really social in track & field because there's a lot of people around you all the time. I'm not really an extremely social person. I like to have a lot of time to myself. I like to have close friends. I'm not good at chitchat.

T&FN: You'd have trouble hitchhiking with an infant son.

Brill: Oh no, easier man. Everybody's a sucker for... [laughing], no. I'm not sure I'd try that. Heck, you can buy a car for a hundred dollars.

I'm happy enough being around him [Neil] lots of times. I don't need to travel around the world. I could just travel around B.C. and the Northwest if I got the bug, which I get sometimes. Our family moved all the time. We moved every 4 years.

T&FN: Really?

Brill: Oh yeah. I think maybe that's part of the reason I have real trouble settling down. I do for short periods of time, and then—it's time for something totally different.

T&FN: What does your father do?

Brill: He's a carpenter now, but he's

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done lots of things. When we were really young he worked in the forest. He used to be gone for a month at a time. It was always really exciting when he came back.

T&FN: *Do you consider yourself a great "natural" athlete?*

Brill: I think it's obvious that I must be. I really started jumping in 1968 and I didn't start training properly until 1975, maybe.

T&FN: *And you'd already won a Commonwealth Games, in 1970.*

Brill: It was very natural for me. Very easy. It was all natural at that point. I used to go out and jump in the meets and in the fall and winter I'd just do whatever I felt like doing.

Lionel [Pugh] used to give me training charts and stuff that I was supposed to follow but I'd just file them. "Forget it! Who wants to do that stuff?"

T&FN: *Being naturally good made you a 6-foot jumper, but being a 6-6 jumper must have required a lot of work.*

Brill: Lionel started coaching me in 1969 but it wasn't until 1978 I ever really let him coach me. There was always this block, something inside me that wouldn't let go. Until 1978 my best was 1.91 [6-3¼] or 1.92 [6-3½]. I knew at that point that I had gone as high as I could go all by myself.

It became a question of "Do you quit, or do you make some serious changes?" It worked very well and my technique has changed a lot since then. We work well together now.

T&FN: *Is it from your philosophy that you find the strength to persevere, to train?*

Brill: I think so. I'm pretty happy most of the time. If I wasn't happy... like last year, something was missing, serious things. I didn't have a kid and I was dying to have kids. So I said, "The heck with it, I don't need to jump right now. There are some things more important in life." I took the year off.

It was kind of a gamble in that there aren't that many people who have had kids and come back.

T&FN: *That's not exactly true, at least not in the Communist Bloc. I'm no biochemist, so I don't know exactly how to phrase it, but there are some great examples throughout track's history, starting with Fanny Blankers-Koen—I'm wondering if the whole business of having a child, which involves so many hormonal processes, has some kind of "steroid" effect.*

Brill: I've been thinking about that. Through my own experience I think it's not nearly so much a physical effect as it is a mental one. I've always believed that high jumping is a mental event.

I've done strength tests through the years, bodyfat, all that. Right after I set the World Record I did a bunch of those: I'm weaker than I have ever been!

That wasn't really surprising. I knew I was. I can't do the workouts I normally do, *The Bible of the Sport*

I don't have any endurance. But I feel great! It's a mental strength.

T&FN: *Did you ever want to to be a shot putter?*

Brill: I did that a couple of times in high school. And I ran. I was sooo quick. I loved that feeling. I don't know if you ever felt that way, but when I was a kid I felt like I never had to touch the ground I could run so fast.

T&FN: *Like when you got a new pair of sneakers and would go out and field-test them. Run, turn sharp corners, feel like Superman?!*

Brill: Yeah, it was so neat! You could make it to school in seconds you were so quick. I loved running. I still do. I like sprinting. Man was made to walk or run. Jogging is the pits; forget it. Gimme some sprinting.

T&FN: *We were talking about flying; not touching the ground. Do you ever feel like an animal? A certain kind of animal, I mean?*

Brill: I do. A human animal.

T&FN: *Never a Bengal tiger, or an eagle?*

Brill: Sometimes I kind of get there, but we're human and we're separate and we're the top of the line. At the same time I sometimes recognize the animal too. That's what takes over sometimes. When you can run like the wind, that's great.

There's nothing like that feeling. Nothing you can think up can ever quite match what you feel; your instincts. Thinking makes us human, yet it doesn't match those great instincts.

T&FN: *Do you ever feel that while you're competing?*

Brill: Oh yes, that's when it's best. You can let go of all the thoughts, "I gotta do this right, I gotta do that right." When I can let go of that and just look at the bar and say, "I can jump that," then I feel great. I can't always do that though.

T&FN: *High jumpers have their own little reverie. It's obvious, as you stand way out there staring at the bar and your eyes glaze over. Where do you go?*

Brill: It's a fine kind of concentration, kind of like meditation. You're thinking of the jumping, but you're not really thinking. It's like a trance.

T&FN: *"Unthinking?"*

Brill: That's best. That's it. You want to feel like you could get over that bar if it was a mile high. Indoors you have people running around, people walking in front of you. You can barely see the bar, but all of that stuff doesn't bother you. When you're at your best nothing gets in. The only thing I'm aware of is the bar and that I'm going to jump over it.

T&FN: *If you were reincarnated, in what event would you like to be proficient? You can even say pole vault if you want to be a man.*

Brill: Well, I have to say I like the high jump and pole vault best. I love running,

but it's so basic. It just doesn't take anything more than running. I want to do something that involves all of it.

Heck, I'd just like to be great at high jumping.

T&FN: *You don't think you are?*

Brill: I could be better. I could be much better.

T&FN: *Were you particularly distraught to lose your World Record indoors?*

Brill: My first reaction was "Ah, &%%@\$!, this goon! How could she?" But she did it legitimately and she's a good jumper. It was just momentary; then there was almost a feeling of relief.

It was kind of crazy after that record. It all came too soon. Nobody knew what to do. Mother and baby and all that. What it did make me see was that I don't like publicity very much.

T&FN: *In the PR sense, or in terms of being in the limelight?*

Brill: I like to walk out onto the arena floor and everybody knows you. That's a wonderful thing. But I don't like walking down the street and have people whispering and pointing, "Do you know who that is?" That has always really bothered me.

I've never had trouble talking to people one-to-one, but all of a sudden I had to equate this with TV. I suddenly realized that I was going into thousands of people's homes. I don't want to be in a thousand people's homes.

T&FN: *Speaking of fame, since you independently invented the flop, do you wish it had your name on it—the Brill Bend—instead of the Fosbury Flop?*

Brill: No, I've never felt that way. I'm quite happy with it the way it is. It doesn't matter that people don't know. I want to be great at what I do, but I don't care if I'm not really well known for it. I think maybe I'm happier for it.

I don't like the way people look at famous people. I've never really had heroes, never really looked up to somebody.

Even if I couldn't be athletically famous it wouldn't bother me. That's not what counts anyway. There's a lot more to us than that. □

Deborah Arden Brill was born March 10, 1953, in Mission, B.C., Canada and is 5-9½/132. Lives in Burnaby, B.C., but competes for America's Pacific Coast Club. "Invented" the flop about the same time as Dick Fosbury, unaware of his style. Coached by Lionel Pugh.

Major meet finishes: Olympics—8th in '72, nh in qualifying in '76; Pan-Am—1st in '71, 4th in '75, 3rd in '79; British Commonwealth—1st in '70, 2nd in '78; World Cup—3rd in '77, 1st in '79. Her progression (with World Ranking and position on yearly list), which has seen her improve every year she has competed for no less than 15 years in a row(!):

1965	12	4-4		1974	21	6-1½	=7
1966	13	4-7½		1975	22	6-2¼ (8)	=4
1967	14	5-4¼		1976	23	6-2¾	=8
1968	15	5-7¾	=49	1977	24	6-3¼ (5)	=9
1969	16	5-9½i	20	1978	25	6-3¼ (5)	9
1970	17	6-½ (7)	9	1979	26	6-5¼ (1)	4
1971	18	6-11 (3)	=6	1980	27	6-5¼ (4)	=2
1972	19	6-1¼ (7)	=7	1981	28	dnc	
1973	20	dnc		1982	29	6-6¼i	