

# EARL BELL

T&FN Interview

by Tom Jordan

**W**ith his soft north-Arkansas drawl and easy friendliness, Earl Bell could be taken for that Southern phenomenon known as the "good ol' boy." But Earl strayed from type early on, when his father introduced him to a backyard vaulting pit at age five. Seventeen years later, the Arkansas State senior has seen much more than the fields surrounding his hometown of Jonesboro.

Showing competitiveness as well as talent, Bell beat Dan Ripley for the '75 NCAA title, both going 18-1. A year later, he out-duelled Terry Porter at the USTFF meet and came away with a new world record of 18-7 $\frac{1}{4}$ —which lasted all of 24 days before Dave Roberts won it back, using Earl's pole, in the Olympic Trials.

Bell made the team, too, and placed an unsatisfying 6th at Montreal, albeit clearing 17-10 $\frac{1}{2}$ . He competed heavily in the '77 indoor season, having what might be termed an interesting variety of marks—ranging from an 18- $\frac{1}{2}$  to a 16-10 $\frac{3}{4}$  to two no-heights.

With spring, Bell's season is starting to look up. Wins at Texas and Kansas in the mid-17s seem to show that he is gathering steam for a try at his third straight NCAA title.

As T&FN talked with him, however, Earl was getting ready for his last home collegiate meet in Jonesboro by fixing up the house he bought as an investment.

**T&FN:** Are you looking forward to the meet tomorrow?

**Bell:** Yeah, they're making a pretty big deal about it around here. I'd like to really get a big crowd out there, get wired and jump good. If you can get the air of excitement out there, that's going to be a big help.

**T&FN:** Is vaulting in your hometown a positive factor?

**Bell:** Well, when I vault at home, I'm more psyched. But as strange as it may seem, I've only vaulted 18-feet once here in a competition. But I've never been beaten here either.

**T&FN:** Your indoor season was kind of, how can I say it . . .

**Bell:** Horse \_\_\_\_\_.

**T&FN:** Well I wouldn't have said that.

**Bell:** I was going to make it easy for you.

I never had a day with smooth vaults one after another, never had one day when everything was clicking. Even at Millrose [18- $\frac{1}{2}$ ], I was erratic.

**T&FN:** Was it bugging you?

**Bell:** I couldn't figure out whether it was mental problems or technique problems. I was trying everything I could: raising the plant, quit drinking, quit everything, but just couldn't put my finger 10—July 1977



on the problem.

**T&FN:** When you're not vaulting well, does it bother you more to be beaten, or not clearing the high heights?

**Bell:** The high heights is what bothers me. If I'm not jumping well, then I don't care whether I win or lose. You just can't be happy jumping 17-0 when you've jumped a foot-and-a-half higher than that.

**T&FN:** Well, outdoors seems to be going a little bit better.

**Bell:** Yeah, it's coming along. I've had some good practices here in the last two weeks. I jumped 17-9 this week, and three weeks ago, I went 18-0 in practice with a big tailwind. So it's just a matter of getting a pretty day and the right competition.

**T&FN:** Does the fact that you're going for your third straight NCAA title add pressure?

**Bell:** I guess so. Added incentive—I'd hate to say added pressure. I'd like to go into a meet like that thinking I'm the one to beat. So I can go out there and strut my stuff and everybody can look and say, "Well, that S.O.B!"

**T&FN:** What's been your impression of Tully's season so far?

**Bell:** He's strong; he's really doing a good job. We'll have to wait and see.

**T&FN:** You once said your goal was a foot improvement every year; is it going to level off now?

**Bell:** I'd hate to say it is, but there's not going to be another foot stuck on there. Last year I jumped 18-7 and I didn't consider myself an 18-and-a-half foot vaulter. I considered myself an 18-foot vaulter because I did it several times in the year. So if I could jump mid-18s a few times, then I would consider that an improvement of 6 inches, even though I might pop a 19-footer sometime.

**T&FN:** Technically, what makes the difference between a 17-8 vault and an 18-8 vault?

**Bell:** I don't know. If I knew exactly, I would be hard as hell to beat. It's got to be a combination of things: waking up in the morning and saying, "I feel great! I don't care what I did yesterday, I feel great today." It's the feeling of confidence—there is no doubt in your mind that you can do it.

**T&FN:** Is that what it was like on the day of your world record?

**Bell:** Yeah. Man, I was ready that day. There was nothing wrong with my vaulting then. It was just run down there and hang on.

**T&FN:** You must be one of the briefer world recordholders ever, 24 days or whatever . . .

**Bell:** Yeah, isn't that sick!

**T&FN:** How did you feel when you lost it?

**Bell:** Well, it's something really you don't ever lose, once you've had the world record. In one way, I'm glad: that I didn't get attached to it. I've heard about world recordholders really getting upset when they lose their records, going to seed.

**T&FN:** Was that your best jump ever?

**Bell:** Nah. Well, it could have been, but I think my best jump technically was my first time over 18, in the '75 NCAA. I was a lot slower than I am now, and not nearly as strong. It was just a perfect jump, with the resources I had.

**T&FN:** Are you still as skinny as you were then?

**Bell:** Still skinny, but a little less skinny. I'm right at 170 now, and I was 8 pounds less then.

**T&FN:** What makes you one of the world's best vaulters?

**Bell:** I think the one main thing is the fact that I'm so much taller than the rest of the guys. I use my height, with a good high plant and a good long swing. You can't do that unless you're 6-3.

**T&FN:** How long do you plan to compete?

**Bell:** I don't know. I got a chance to meet old Bob Richards and he told me I had at least three Olympics left in me, and I told him I was kinda hoping for two, and he gives me this, "You've got at least 3 and maybe 4!" and I'm going "Great, you've got me psyched."

**T&FN:** How do you view your Montreal Olympic experience?

**Bell:** I kinda went there thinking I could win and I left the place knowing I should have won. So you can't be too happy with it.

**T&FN:** What went wrong?

**Bell:** Well, on 18-2, my last try, the bar fell off... [chuckles]. My third attempt was a good attempt, though.

**T&FN:** If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently?

**Bell:** Well, I think I'd start at a higher height would be the main thing. I wasn't aware that this competition was going to drag on for three days. I figured it would be a four-hour deal. False. It just went on forever. If I had it to do over again, I probably would have started at 17-6 [instead of 17-¾].

**T&FN:** Were your feelings about the Olympic experience positive?

**Bell:** For sure. There ain't nothing like it. I was just unhappy with my performance.

**T&FN:** Who were your major competitors?

**Bell:** Going into the competition?

**T&FN:** Well, even coming out. I mean, Kalliomaki has never impressed me that much.

**Bell:** He's never really scared me either. I was kinda amazed.

Kozak's pretty tough, even though he didn't do well there; he had that ankle injury. And gosh sakes, Slusarski is so fast that if he's even half on, his runway speed is going to carry him to 18, anyway. Roberts, of course, can always blow one away, go 20-feet high. You never know about him.

**T&FN:** What's Roberts' best point?

*Bible of the Sport*

**Bell:** He grips real high, and to do that, there's something he does just before he leaves the ground. He holds the trunk of his body pretty well vertical for an extra instant there while he's still driving in and the pole is bending. Most guys have already initiated a little bit of swing. It really looks powerful when you stand close and see it.

**T&FN:** Do you see anybody else

after you graduate besides compete?

**Bell:** Well, I'm going to get a degree in accounting, then take a bunch of other courses, and hopefully take the CPA exam—see how bad it hurts me.

**T&FN:** What do you do when you're not going to school or training?

**Bell:** That just leaves two things—[women] and drinking.

**T&FN:** How can you say that so I can print it?

**Bell:** [women] and drinking? What's wrong with that? No, don't say drinking—my coach would have a baby.

**T&FN:** Sometimes it seems that in all track and field, the craziest people seem to be the pole vaulters.

**Bell:** I'd have to agree with that.

**T&FN:** Why is that?

**Bell:** Well, if you're a moderate, you just aren't going to be an 18-foot vaulter. You've got to be half-crazy and be able to lie to yourself and tell yourself you can do it.

**T&FN:** What do you do for fun when you're not vaulting?

**Bell:** Well, I've turned into Joe Homemaker, you know, messing with this old house. The money I make in resale maybe will help me get on the road... Also, my brother takes me waterskiing a lot.

**T&FN:** Does it ever surprise you that at 21 you've been to the Olympics, had a world record and lost it already, and gone over 18-¾?

**Bell:** You make it sound like I'm pretty good. I must be an ungrateful S.O.B. to be dissatisfied with what's going on.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think anything has stormed over me. The only thing that really hit me quick without going after it was that first 18-foot jump. I was unprepared for that. But otherwise, I don't think it's coming too fast. □

Bell's progression (NC=NCAA placing; AA=AAU placing; WR=world ranking; US=US ranking):

	NC	AA	WR	US
1973	15-6			
1974	16-8	8	1(Jr)	
1975	18-1 CR	1	4	3 1
1976	18-3½ CR; 18-7¼ WR	1	1	4 2



Rich Clarkson

coming up who is going to be as good as those guys?

**Bell:** Well, let me think. Who's the guy from Irvine, black-headed guy? [Mike] Sabatino. He could be pretty tough.

**T&FN:** What do you think the world record will be in 1980, and who will hold it?

**Bell:** Good old honest guess... It will be 19-¾ or 19-½.

**T&FN:** And who's going to hold it?

**Bell:** Geez, I'd hate to give myself all that much credit... Somebody will do it.

**T&FN:** What do you plan on doing