

T&FN INTERVIEW

Evelyn Ashford



by Jon Hendershott

Evelyn Ashford is the *grande dame* of American sprinting. In 1992, she was also the world's most experienced sprinter.

At the age of 35, Ashford made her fourth U.S. Olympic team in the 100. In Barcelona, she was the oldest competitor—man or woman—in the dashes. She advanced to the semis, where she ran 5th to just miss a fourth century final.

But Ashford led off the 4 x 100 winners, striking gold for the fourth time (to go with wins in the '84 100 and relay and the '88 4 x 1) and fifth medal overall (she ran 2nd in the '88 100).

Her quartet of golds puts her in an elite group of women, four-time Olympic champions: Fanny Blankers-Koen, Betty Cuthbert and Bärbel Wöckel.

But now Ashford looks to 1993 as her final year in the sport. It's time to retire, to go into

business with Ray Washington, her husband of 14 years, and raise their daughter Raina, 7.

In an international career spanning 16 years, Ashford accumulated a lifetime of memories. From the callow 19-year-old in Montréal, through the grueling training of coach/mentor Pat Connolly. The bitter U.S. boycott in 1980 and a pull in the '83 Worlds final. Victory in '84, followed by a WR 10.76. More medals in '88, as well as the high honor as flagbearer in the Opening Ceremonies. Disappointment and ultimate glory in Barcelona.

For Ashford, it will apparently come to an end after 1993:

T&FN: So you're back in training?

Ashford: Yes. I decided to do one more year, then retire. Next year will be my "farewell tour." I'm planning a full season in '93. Got to get these old bones moving.

All the disappointment and frustration from the disasters of '80 and '83 were washed away in LA in '84 when Ashford won her first Oly gold.

I find that if I space my races too far apart, I lose something. So if I keep a steady schedule, like a meet every three days or so, it keeps the engine tuned up and running a little better.

And that's indoors and out—but the championship situations like the Worlds indoors and outdoors, I don't know about. Those are big "maybes."

T&FN: How do you feel about next year being your last, the literal end of the race?

Ashford: Oh, I'm excited. It's time to move on to something else. We're going to get a McDonald's franchise. I'll try being a businesswoman for a while. Edith McGuire ['64 Olympic 200 champ] has several of them in Oakland and I'd like to try to do that.

T&FN: When you got really serious about running in 1976, could you ever have envisioned yourself staying in it this long?

Ashford: When I started, I thought it basically was, "One Olympics and you retire." But the sport and its rules kept changing. The longer I stayed in it, the more open track became for athletes to make a living at it. So that helped me stay in a lot longer.

T&FN: Physically, the sprints were events associated with younger athletes. Has there been one factor that has contributed most to your longevity at the top level?

Ashford: A big thing is that Pat taught me good habits. She was the best coach for me. She taught me to listen to my body and gear my training sessions to that.

She helped me learn to eat right, and just do all the right things. I think I was a good pupil and learned from her all the habits you need to stay around awhile.

T&FN: Did the age aspect ever become a motivator? To show, "I can still do it at age 30," or whatever?

Ashford: Well, it did become a factor this year. I started feeling... old! [laughs] I turned 35 and I started feeling changes in my body—and also in my whole attitude toward the sport. It was pretty difficult for me this year, just to get through it.

T&FN: Was it tougher to accommodate to the mental change or the physical change?

Ashford: The mental change, which

was that the sport wasn't so important to me anymore. Up until '92, running still was really important to me.

But this year, it just wasn't. I still wanted to make the team—that was important to me. But beyond that, I just didn't have the fire any longer.

T&FN: *Did running become almost a job?*

Ashford: Yes, this year it did. I've had a great run and for a long time it had been a love, a passion. But it changed this year. That was the sign that, "Evelyn, you should move on to something else. It's time to go."

T&FN: *In light of that mental change, can you put into words your feelings after you crossed the line in New Orleans to make the team again?*

Ashford: Ohhh, I was excited! It had been a rough, tough year for Ray and me. I had had a slight injury to my left Achilles. Plus with the change in my attitude, it was so hard for me to even train this past year.

So when I made the team, it was like, "Oh, God loves me! Somebody's watching over me!" It was like a gift, an incredibly valuable gift and a wonderful way to cap off the final years of my career.

T&FN: *One of the first things you mentioned was having your mother make you a big chocolate cake.*

Ashford: That was another thing: I was so used to giving up things and I just didn't want to do it this year. I didn't want to give up my junk food. I didn't want to do those extra sit-ups at night before I went to bed.

I didn't want to do all those extra little things you have to do to be a champion. And it was all because my attitude had changed toward the sport.

T&FN: *You said you felt some relief and sadness in Barcelona, but you also were quoted, "I came to the ball to dance." That still sounds pretty competitive, but in fact how did you view your chances?*

Ashford: I thought I would make it to the final. I never thought I would medal, but I did expect to be one of the top 8 sprinters in the world. I still believe that I am. I just ran a bad race. I just didn't have the fire. Maybe that's what age does to you.

T&FN: *The press made much of age, and in fact you were the oldest sprinter in Barcelona, man or woman. Did you ever even think about that?*

Ashford: No, that didn't cross my mind. I just wanted to get to that final! But I didn't do it. I figured I could finish no worse than 5th in the final, but it just didn't happen for me.

T&FN: *Nevertheless, you were the great veteran on that team, which must have been a plus for the other runners. You said you actually gave Esther Jones a "two-handed" pass, which seems like something an experienced*



Clive Brunskill/Bob Thomas photography

T&FN: *But you also were quoted about having another chance in the 4 x 100. Was there any sense of relief to have a second chance in the relay?*

Ashford: Well, I got a medal out of my fourth Olympics at the age of 35. I don't know if that's history-making or what, but I was just happy to have left Barcelona with something. So I guess I was happy to have another shot at it.

T&FN: *Were your feelings in the Olympic relay affected any by what happened at Tokyo in '91 when the stick was dropped?*

Ashford: We got to redeem ourselves. It was basically the same team. The order was different, but we got that stick around and we proved we're still the best sprinters in the world. I'm very proud of that.

T&FN: *How did you feel about starting the Olympic relay rather than anchoring, which you did in '84 and '88?*

Ashford: I was very nervous. I had started a relay maybe once before in my whole career. I'm used to anchoring. So it was an adjustment for me. But, I tried to have a nice, positive attitude; cooperate with the coaches. . .

A dozen years of the classic Ashford-Göhr rivalry came to an end when the American outleaned the German at the line to win 4 x 100 gold in Seoul.

veteran would recognize to do.

Ashford: I was very nervous about that first handoff. I knew if we didn't connect with the stick, then it wasn't going to go around. Maybe I overreacted by giving it to her with two hands—I just grabbed her wrist with one hand and gave her the stick with the other. But I wanted to make sure she got it so that we had a chance.

T&FN: *Going back to the Seoul relay for a second, could you really have had a better situation to anchor against Marlies Göhr? Here was the great rival for much of your career, in her last Olympics and you feeling so good—what an ideal situation.*

Ashford: I didn't think about any of that. I just wanted to win! [laughs] I just remember that our position wasn't the best by the time I got the stick, and I just concentrated on winning. I didn't think about, "Oh, this is Marlies Göhr."

ASHFORD INTERVIEW — cont:

T&FN: After winning in Barcelona, can you describe your feelings knowing you'd be on that victory stand one last time?

Ashford: Again, just relief—that it was my last Olympics and, yes, I would end my career with a gold medal.

T&FN: Considering that feeling, then, is that Barcelona medal any more special than any of your other gold medals?

Ashford: No, it's not more special. They're all very special. They all symbolize different stages of my life, as well as my career.

T&FN: You asked Linford Christie if winning the 100m gold was like he thought it would be. He seemed to feel the actual winning was almost an anticlimax. For you, is the striving for an Olympic championship more important than actually winning one?

Ashford: Yes, it is the striving. Getting the victory isn't what it's all about. It's knowing what you went through to get there, the working to get there. That's what it's all about. The actual winning really is anticlimactic.

T&FN: As you got older and more experienced in the sprints, how did your motivations expand and change?

Ashford: The motivations were different each time. In '76, I was just a rookie. It opened my eyes to a whole new world and I wanted to be a part of that world. So I went home and started working very hard. I felt I could make it in that world, as a world-class athlete.

By '84, I knew I was a world-class athlete; I knew I had a chance to win a gold medal. My motivations were different by then because I was thinking like a champion. I knew I could do it—I just wanted that day to hurry up and arrive so I could do it.

Then by '88, it was a matter of, "Let's see if you can do it again." Like I said, I felt so good. Thirty-one is such a good age—it really is! You have all this experience; you've been there and your body isn't on a downward spiral. Your body hasn't caught up with you yet.

So in '88, even though I was 2nd—Florence was a surprise to everybody—I just felt great that year. I knew I had what it took. So my motivation then was, "Hey, I'm going to do this again. I can feel it."

But by '92, I felt different, like I've said. I didn't have the fire I once had. All the years just caught up with me. So my motivation for '92 was just to make the

team. Then the next goal was to make it to the Olympic final. I really just took '92 in stages.

T&FN: Over and above the relay in Tokyo, your experiences at the World Championships haven't approached the Olympics. Fifth in the Tokyo 100 is your highest placing in the Worlds.

Ashford: You know, I was thinking about that recently. The year before the Olympics just isn't good for me. I don't know what it is.

I've never had a good World Championships—so maybe that should be my goal for '93. Maybe you're helping me set my goal for next year. I should just shoot for it.

Well, we will have to wait and see how I feel once I get out there next year before I make Stuttgart a real goal.

T&FN: In your entire career, does one achievement stand out most for you?

Ashford [without hesitating]: My

Ashford's 4 Olympics

Asked about the highlights of her four Olympic experiences, Evelyn Ashford thinks for a bit. Then, rather than recall specific races, she reflects on the feelings engendered by each Games:

"At my first in '76 in Montréal—just being there and feeling I was part of something beautiful. I realized this is what I wanted to do. I wanted to be an Olympian—and an Olympic champion one day.

"The second one in '84 was tough, like this year. There was a lot of pressure. When I think of LA, I think of the 'bigness' of it. It was at home and it was just such big news. And I felt stress, too, because I was expected to win the medal.

"In '88—by then my husband and I were trying to do it ourselves. I felt satisfaction at being able to do it on our own. It was Ray's first time to coach me through something that important. Yet we achieved our goals.

"We worked very hard and I felt very good that whole season. I felt as strong as I ever felt. I felt so good at that age—I wish I were 31 again!

"And then my last Olympics—with it being hard for me the whole year, I guess I felt relief that it was over. I knew Barcelona was my last one, so I felt a little sadness, too."

World Record against Marlies Göhr in 1984. That stands out more than anything else. She was my nemesis.

T&FN: Biggest disappointment the '80 boycott, or what?

Ashford: Yes, I'd say so.

T&FN: As bitter as the boycott was, and the whole 1980 year, could it have extended your career?

Ashford: It did extend my career. If I had gone to Russia and won my gold medals the way I expected to, I probably would have retired.

But the way it happened, I stayed around for another four years. Then the rules changed as far as earning money, so that helped me stay in it another four years.

T&FN: You spoke of opening a business for the future. But have you ever thought about other areas in life to which you could devote as much drive and determination as you have to sprinting?

Ashford: It's my passion. I can't see myself being that passionate about anything else at this point in my life. I don't think I'll ever have the love and the obsessiveness about something as I have had about my running. It's been my one and only love.

T&FN: Is there anything in your career you wish you'd done differently?

Ashford: It's hard to say, but I don't think so. I believe the way things turn out is how they're supposed to turn out.

T&FN: Is there anything you wish you could have done in the sport, but were unable to do?

Ashford: I wish I could have run the 200 in one Olympics [laughs]. I've never doubled in an Olympic year. Okay, if I could do something over again: I would go back to '84 and make the team at 200 so I could have doubled in the Games.

But then again, it might have taken away from my 100. You just don't know.

T&FN: In Pat's book [Coaching Evelyn, published in 1991], she mentioned some people thought you could have been a better at the 200 than the 100. Did you ever feel drawn more to one sprint than the other?

Ashford: In the beginning, I loved the 200 more than the 100. I was afraid of the 100—it was just too intense. There's nothing like a 100m sprint: it's all stress and total concentration. But in the 200, you have more time to relax.

So I always enjoyed the 200 more than

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ASHFORD — continued from p. 46

the 100. But Pat steered me toward the 100; she felt that was my best race—and I guess she was right!

T&FN: *But is it possible that some alter ego of yours came out in the 100, some aggressive side that might not have come out any other way?*

Ashford: I don't know. I don't see myself as being that aggressive. I love running. I don't think you have to be a mean person.

I know my running is my passion, but I would like to find something else in my life—besides my family—something job-wise that could satisfy that.

T&FN: *What does your daughter think of all you have done?*

Ashford: Well, she's not exactly impressed. Maybe later she'll realize. But now she doesn't make a big deal of it. It's just, "Mom, all you do is run. So what."

T&FN: *The realization will come one day—but what will you do when she says, "Mom, I want to be a sprinter"?*

Ashford: I'll probably say, "Raina, are you serious?!" □

Evelyn Ashford was born April 15, 1957, in Shreveport, Louisiana, and is 5-5/120. Married to Ray Washington; one daughter. Graduated from Roseville, California, HS in '75 and competed for UCLA 1976-'78. Currently represents the Mazda TC. One of only four women in history to win four Olympic golds.

Major Meets: 100: '75—4)TAC Jr; '76—2)AIWA, 3)OT, 5)OG; '77—1)AIWA, 1)TAC, 5)WCP; '78—2)AIWA, 3)TAC; '79—1)TAC, 1)PAG, 1)WCP;

'81—1)TAC, 1)OF, 1)WCP; '82—1)TAC, 1)OF; 83—1)TAC, 1)OF, dnf)WC; '84—1)OT, 1)OG; '86—3)TAC, 1)OF; '87—6sf)TAC; '88—2)OT, 2)OG; '90—3)TAC; '91—3)TAC, 5)WC; '92—3)OT, 5sf)OG.

200: '75—3sf)TAC; '77—1)AIWA, 1)TAC, 4)WCP; '78—1)AIWA, 1)TAC; '79—1)TAC, 1)PAG, 1)WCP; '81—1)TAC, 1)WCP; '83—1)TAC; '84—dnf-h)OT; '87—5)TAC.

4 x 100: '76—7)OG; '77—4)WCP; '79—1)PAG, 1)WCP; '81—1)WCP; '84—1)OG; '88—1)OG; '91—dnf)WC '92—1)OG.

PRs: 100—10.76 ('84) (2, 5 W, A); 200—21.83 ('79) (4, 8 A); 400—51.08 ('84); 800—2:13.07 ('84).

Progression (with World & U.S. Rankings):

Yr	Age	100	200	400
'75	18	11.5	24.2	—
'76	19	11.21 (8, 2)	23.9w	—
'77	20	11.25 (x, 2)	22.62 (7, 1)	—
'78	21	11.16 (4, 1)	22.66 (3, 1)	54.9
'79	22	10.97 (1, 1)	21.83 (2, 1)	51.57 (x, 5)
'80	23	11.33	—	52.5
'81	24	10.90(A) (1, 1)	21.84 (1, 1)	51.80 (x, 3)
'82	25	10.93 (2, 1)	22.10 (3, 1)	53.04
'83	26	10.79(A) (3, 1)	21.88 (5, 1)	52.10
'84	27	10.76 (1, 1)	22.75 (x, 7)	51.06 (x, 9)
'85	28	maternity	—	—
'86	29	10.88 (1, 1)	21.97 (2, 1)	—
'87	30	11.13 (x, 10)	22.55 (x, 6)	53.55
'88	31	10.81 (2, 2)	23.09	—
'89	32	11.05 (5, 3)	23.22	—
'90	33	11.07 (5, 3)	—	—
'91	34	11.08 (6, 3)	22.88 (x, 6)	—
'92	35	11.07 (?)	22.47 (?)	—

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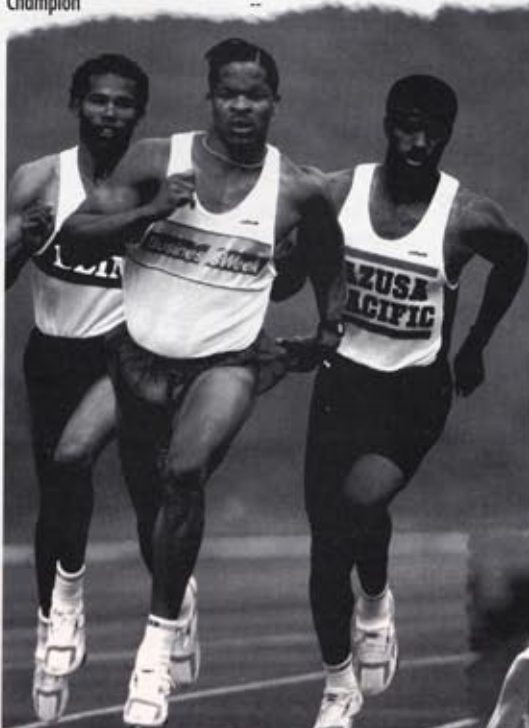
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RESEARCH

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(Source: 1992 Runner's World Readers Poll)

	1986	1988	1990	1992
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HIND	13.9%	25.7%	39.9%	43.6%
Sub 4	18.8%	22.5%	20.8%	17.2%
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