

T&FN Interview: John Godina

by Jon Hendershott

John Godina's life has revolved around the shot and discus, but never has the 23-year-old had a more successful year of that life than 1995.

As a UCLA senior, he won an NCAA double—booming a Collegiate Record 72-2¹/₄ in the shot. He won 14 of his 15 shot competitions, capped by the world title, which came with a Mercedes as a prize. He also made the Göteborg discus final and became the first thrower in nearly 20 years to World Rank in both events (see p. 56).

The Cheyenne, Wyoming, native first threw as a 10-year-old at the urging of father Bill, a high school coach. As he grew, mother Oma would eye John's technique when Bill was away. Now John has a special relationship with UCLA throws coach Art Venegas (see box).

This fall, John has had little spare time to dwell on reaching what he calls his "breakthrough" year. He is closing in on his biology degree with a heavy class load.

But given time to reflect, Godina is like a scientist: analytical, incisive, forthright. And he can aim his droll wit at himself:

T&FN: Art says you've been tooling around town lately in your new Mercedes. How's that?

Godina: It's nice. I decided it was something I earned and I should enjoy it. I asked for personalized license plates of either "'96 GOLD" or "GOLD '96." They haven't come yet, so I don't know if I got one of them.

T&FN: Before 1995 began, did the phrase "world champion" mean anything to you?

Godina: I never thought about it. "World champion" always meant all those athletes who were so great—but now it's *me* [laughs]. It's something people talk about now, but I've almost become numb to it. You just think of yourself as you.

I know that no matter what I won last season, this coming year everybody will do their best to beat me. I'm going to tattoo a big target on my forehead. Like the "Far Side" cartoon of the deer with the target on its belly: "Ooooh, bummer of a birthmark." That's me.

T&FN: You've had a real "family" feeling throughout your career. Has that family aspect been a benefit?

Godina: For sure. The little problems in life, I tend to shrug off because I don't think anything of them. I just know I have to stiffen up. Other people can have a harder time doing that when they haven't had that family support in their life.

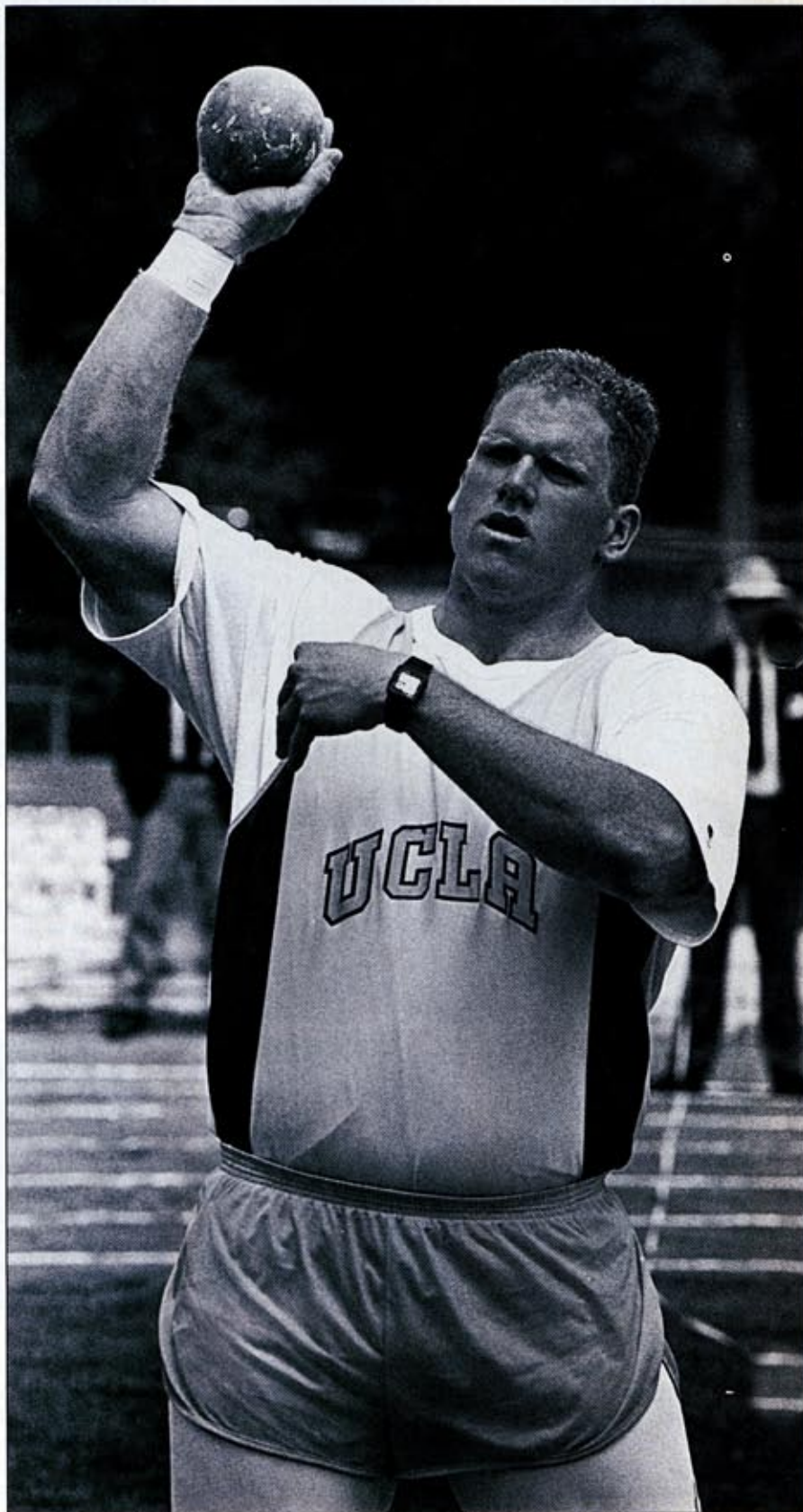
There's nothing I can say that will make someone else feel better who hasn't had that support. But it sure is great to be one of the lucky ones who had such a great family.

T&FN: How did they react to what happened in '95, which stamped you as the world's best?

Godina: I think they're still trying to get a grasp of all that's going on. It's a little hard for them to comprehend because they've worked so hard all their lives. I'm very lucky these things happened to me. But it never happened to them, so when it happens to someone they know, they might naturally think there's some catch. They're still trying to get used to it all.

T&FN: Are you still trying to get used to it?

Godina: To a certain degree. The stuff that goes



along with being really good in the world is kinda neat. When you're in school, you have something to do all day. Once you're done with school and training, everybody either gets a job or gets bored. But when you get to a certain level in the sport, it's seems like there's something to do all day. That's really neat. I'd hate to sit around and do nothing.

T&FN: *You're studying biology; is that a step toward medical school?*

Godina: It was, but my grades just haven't held up as I'd like. There was a point a couple of years ago where I decided there were a lot of doctors in the world. But there are only a handful of people who can do what I do.

It would be great to be a doctor, yes. But in the long run, I know I'd be a lot more proud and happier with myself knowing I'd given my all to something that only a few people can do really well.

On the other hand, if you really want to be in elite company, you've got to keep winning. That's what I need to think about now.

T&FN: *Your dad was a thrower, so is that how the events got into your blood? Or was there something else about them that captivated you?*

Godina: My dad brought it around me. But once I had a good throw in junior high school, it felt great. People oohed and aahed; it was nice that people appreciated it. I liked attention, like anybody else, and it was a neat way to get attention. Not too many people did it and I felt why not keep doing it because it feels really good when you do it right.

T&FN: *"Getting it right" now makes you the best in the world.*

Godina: If you win, there's no two ways about it—you've won. That's the beauty of the sport. It's not like people debating whether Emmitt Smith or Barry Sanders is the better running back. In track, you either win or you don't.

T&FN: *With the benefit of hindsight, how do you view your '95 season? It was nearly perfect, since you lost only once.*

Godina: If it had been "perfect," I would have won two gold medals. [Laughs] I've got two events to work on; I'm not happy with

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just one. It was a far from perfect year, but it definitely was a breakthrough year.

Yet there's no reason at all to think I can just repeat what I did last year and have the same results next season.

But it was good that I got off the plateau I feel I'd been on for too long. I hadn't PRed in quite a while. I was stuck around 65 for three

years and at 204 for too long. Finally, I was able to break through. It was a relief, more than anything.

T&FN: *Was it more satisfying to reach those distances, or to win the world title? Or do they even compare?*

Godina: Winning the NCAA shot title was simply the best thing I've ever felt. It was my absolute last chance—and it took five years to get it, but it was worth the wait. It meant more to me than the Worlds. The Worlds really were a bonus. We had that in our minds for only a couple of months. But we thought about the NCAA title for five years.

T&FN: *Your next meet was your sole loss of the year, a 2nd at the USATF. Was that due partially to a letdown after the emotionally-charged NCAA?*

Godina: Some, but I also had a very sore right wrist. I hurt it on a throw at the NCAA and didn't practice much before nationals. I finally got a shot of cortisone. The wrist hurt so much it kept me awake at night. But it's fine now.

T&FN: *How did you strain your right elbow warming up in Göteborg?*

Godina: It was some muscle connector between the triceps and the point of the elbow. It's OK now, too. Actually, I'm pretty proud of my opening throw, because of the injury. We got two throws in the stadium; my second was at 68 and I felt okay. But then we had to wait a good half-hour for an award ceremony.

But I opened at 70 feet, with the hurt elbow and not really knowing what might happen. So just to keep the concentration I thought was a pretty good job.

T&FN: *Both the throws define John Godina in the sport, but are there things outside track that also define who you are?*

Godina: It's hard to say because you just think of yourself as you. I don't stop and think of things as defining me. I just do things. I don't really do a lot outside the sport. Maybe that's not the philosophically "perfect existence." But I do a lot in my sport and I'm tired afterward. Often, I don't have the energy to go around and do a lot of other things.

T&FN: *School and throwing have defined your life to a great degree to this point.*

Godina: They have. I'm still young. A lot of my existence is dependent on fulfilling other people's expectations of me, and doing what I need to get my proper "accreditation" in both track and academic circles. That takes a lot of time and energy.

T&FN: *You have said you don't think you could be a coach because you haven't patience to*

Venegas Godina's Mentor

UCLA's Art Venegas has been central in John Godina's life, not only athletically but also as a mentor, role model and most importantly, a friend, says Godina:

"He's all of that. The only reason we're talking is because he coaches me. At the same time, there's a great friendship. Actually, I don't get to spend as much time with him as I would like. With school, our schedules are really busy.

"But the time we have spent together has been really fun. I've learned a lot. He's been like a surrogate parent for the last five years.

"I've always felt that UCLA took a big chance recruiting me out of high school—and it was on Art's say-so. I may have been a two-time All-America in the discus, but I always wondered if recruiting a Wyoming discus thrower was the greatest idea. It isn't the calmest place as far as winds. So you don't know, 'Is a guy really good, or is he a product of a wind tunnel?'

"I just thought it was kind of risky on UCLA's part to accept someone who wasn't very physically imposing at the time. Art saw a video on my recruiting trip and it wasn't even the discus. It was me gliding in the shot.

"Right there, he decided he wanted me. He must not have seen me as a risk, but when you're a discus thrower who doesn't really like the shot. . . I mean, I never was an All-America in the shot. I was only the No. 12 high school putter in the country as a senior.

"I had these things working against me and then Art just saw on paper that I also threw the shot and he said, 'OK, I want you.' I mean, if the school was going to give me the money to go there just based on the word of this weirded-out coach who thought I could throw the shot, that was fine by me."

tolerate someone who couldn't do a physical task that seemed easy to you. Is a factor in this attitude that you demand a lot from yourself?

Godina: It's possible. A friend once told me, "You're totally obsessed by the sport. It's the only aspect of your life; the only thing you care about." I know everything she said was on the mark, but I've taken throwing a long way and benefited from it.

I don't know if I demand a lot from myself. But I really don't like people saying negative things about me or what I'm doing and have it proven right. Maybe it's a revenge factor that drives me. If people say I can't do something, I want to prove them wrong.

T&FN: *But could an athlete today reach the sport's highest level without some degree of obsession?*

Godina: You can't lead a balanced life and expect to be the best at something. How can you concentrate on everything, and still be No. 1 in one thing? There are very few Mozarts or Michelangelos in the world. Most people have to work very hard if they want to be the best at something.

But I think everybody expects a lot of themselves. When you stop expecting a lot of yourself is when you become disgruntled with life. But you won't have real problems if you're always trying to improve yourself.