

JOHN POWELL

It was a curious sight: a half dozen athletes or so were crammed into the back seat behind the heavy wire screen with no way out since the back doors didn't have handles; vaulting poles on the roof hung out over the hood and trunk, cradled between the yellow warning light on one side and the red flasher in the middle; several javelins balanced on a spotlight on the car's right side, the ends stuck in a partially lowered window.

The car was a blue and white patrol car of the San Jose Police Department and behind the wheel sat an imposing figure in a dark blue uniform. But Officer John Powell was off duty at the time; he had just won the discus at the San Jose Invitational and he was ferrying some athletes to the airport. He was scheduled to go back on duty soon but he was helping out with transportation.

It must have been quite a sight to San Jose's citizenry to see one of their finest with such an assortment of people, poles and paraphernalia—on a police car, no less.

Somehow it was in keeping with John Powell's droll, tongue-in-cheek manner. He has a sharp wit, often punctuated by a good-natured gruffness and bravado. Just by his physical appearance—6-2/235lb. and a so metimes unexpectedly brusque manner—he can have an intimidating air.

He makes plenty of noise when he is in the discus ring—both when he lets the plate go at the end of one of his whirlwind spins and in an overall impact on the event. Since 1972, when he placed a surprise fourth at Munich, Powell has entrenched himself as the premier American discus thrower—and one of the world's top three, along with Finn Pentti Kahma and Sweden's Ricky Bruch. And Powell may well be the best of them all.

Rated fourth in the world in '73, he is a strong contender for the top spot this year. And he has built a convincing case—winner in 27 of 29 meets this year; AAU champion; British champion; French champion; exceeded 200 feet in all but two of those 29 meets; over 205 in 21, 210 in 12, 215 in five and 220 twice; surpassed the 224-5 world record with a mighty 227-11 but in an unsanctioned meet, producing 222-8, 221-4 and 220-6 heaves in the same series; averaged 209-3 during a 14-meet European tour, winning 12 meets, beating Bruch in their one meeting and going 1-2 versus Kahma; averaged only three inches less for the entire season; averaged 216-1 for his top 10 throws this year—a mark only four others bettered with even one throw during the season.

While he may appear harsh to the casual observer, Powell is also a quiet, serious man with the perceptions born of a seasoned competitor. The droll humor slips



Chip Kane/Sportsphotos

in every so often, though. This curious combination comes out especially when he talks about the discus.

T&FN: You really established yourself this year as probably the top discus thrower in the world in terms of consistency and marks.

Powell: Well I had a more positive attitude, I made a few minor changes in technique and, when I went to Europe, I put on 10lb instead of losing weight.

T&FN: What did you change in your style?

Powell: A couple of minor things which made my technique more consistent. The way I throw is very precise and if I'm off a little bit my distance hurts. Basically I simplified it to get more drive across the ring and more lift, using my legs.

T&FN: Is consistency in the disc a matter of style?

Powell: The two go hand-in-hand. Basically it takes someone who knows about the discus to say if his style is consistent. Like I threw 223-4 at Modesto then 215-0 at Kennedy the next week. Some people might say, "He dropped off eight feet. He's not consistent at all." But they were pretty comparable if you consider the conditions at both places—helpful wind at Modesto, almost none at Berkeley. You have to understand what is behind a particular throw. Remembering that, I think I hit a pretty good level and was pretty consistent.

My average for the 14 meets in Europe was 209-3, my high was 215-0, the

low was 203-6. I lost the third meet, to Kahma at Helsinki, and the last one, to Kahma at Lappeenranta in Finland. In the first one, Kahma and Ricky both were there and they are always keyed against each other. Then I had to show up and I didn't know what I was walking into. As I recall, I fainted the night before when I found out they would both be there. Woke up in the ring and there they were. One thing about all those meets against those guys, though: they always threw last so I never had a chance to come back on the last throw. That's how Kahma beat me in the last meet. I never had the last chance.

T&FN: Talking about consistency, how hard is it to travel around Europe and throw, sometimes day after day, against the best? Did you try to win each meet, or just do your best, or what?

Powell: I was interested to observe myself in that, make mental notes and see what happened. In some meets, I didn't throw well, for whatever reasons. My goal once I got over there was to always throw 200 feet. After a time I upped that to 62 meters (203-5). I felt I could throw at least that under any conditions and I did at least that in every meet.

But coming off a poor performance either the day before or a couple of days before a major meet, when I went into competition with Kahma or Ricky, I usually rose to the occasion. The adrenalin was flowing and I had confidence in my technique, that my technique would be there.

T&FN: Whom do you consider your prime rivals in both the world and US?

Powell: Well, Ricky and Kahma in the world and Mac Wilkins among Americans. He didn't show up that much in US meets but he threw well towards the end in Europe. I think he's kind of laying in wait.

T&FN: Who has the best technique in the world, besides you?

Powell: Besides me? You should have asked who has the best technique so I could have said me—in all humility. Really, I've seen most of the good throwers of today and the thing about them is that they have mass, size and strength. Compared to them, I have little in those three areas. Technically I like Danek; he's very smooth out there. Actually he's been my idol.

T&FN: How would you describe your technique? We've heard someone gave you your tee-shirt with the Roadrunner on the sleeves because of your fast spin.

Powell: Basically I try to develop linear, instead of circular, motion across the ring. The discus is thrown with the legs and hips. I want to develop slow-to-fast across the ring. It's more important to do things correctly than to do them fast. If



Powell spins to AAU title. [Sequence photography by Don Chadez]

you can do them fast and correctly, that's all the more power to you. I'm not at that stage yet because I've only been doing this for nine years you understand.

T&FN: *How did you get onto this?*

Powell: It was pretty easy. When I started competing, everyone was bigger and stronger than me. I knew I couldn't use strength for throwing, because I didn't have it. There was a lot of trial and error but I knew there was a way for me to beat those bigger people.

Basically success in discus throwing is the sum of a lot of little things. There are a lot of small things which go into the linear throw. My style isn't based on natural quickness but on a quickness that comes from doing all the little movements correctly. The others can pretty much muscle it because they are bigger and stronger.

T&FN: *You're tongue-in-cheek when you say you're small. Sure there are some monsters like Bruch and Gardenkrans. The big guys seem to waste a lot of motion, but your style seems much more economical.*

Powell: I think it is because, at one point or another, I've thought about every conceivable thing in the discus, even down to what my toes do, where they're pointed. I want to eliminate any unnecessary motion.

Also one of the biggest things for me the last couple of years has been that I have become more confident. I've seen and competed against the best in the world and beaten most of them. It's experience and what it boils down to is that you aren't competing against the others initially, but against yourself. If you throw your best and lose, that's the way it goes. But if you don't throw your best and lose, then you have a reason to kick yourself.

Bible of the Sport

T&FN: *How much of world class throwing is mental?*

Powell: When the top people meet, it comes down to the fact that on one day, one can beat the others. That's where the mental aspect takes over. You have to know yourself and by being in similar experiences, you can judge and determine how you'll be in this particular one and where you'd like to improve. Basically success in discus throwing comes from making a lot of mistakes, just as in anything in life. You can't stagnate; you have to go out there and make mistakes and learn from them. You can't stick your head in the sand and just hope you'll do well.

T&FN: *You really moved into the world spotlight in '72, but what motivated you to keep throwing after college?*

Powell: What else is there in life? It's fine being a policeman but it doesn't differentiate you from the masses. My goal in life is to die healthy. I do a lot of things many other discus throwers don't do, like a lot of running.

Even I realize I'm not going to be in the top 10 or one of the best forever. I figure no more than 20 or 30 more years. I think health is extremely important. There are a lot of millionaires in the world and if I put as much time into making money as I do into discus throwing I would be doing well. But all the money in the world can't buy you health. You don't get something for nothing, especially when it relates to your body.

My goal each year has just been to improve and I've done that every year. A turning point was the '71 AAU when I placed seventh and fouled a throw that would have put me second. I told myself right then I would never again foul a throw

that would win me a high place or an important competition. If someone was going to beat me, they would do it; I wouldn't beat myself. Since then, I don't think I've had any fouls longer than my best legal throw.

T&FN: *How about Munich?*

Powell: Yeah, how about Munich.

T&FN: *How did placing fourth affect your motivation?*

Powell: A few days before the meet, I threw 226 in practice and I knew I had come to Munich with the wrong dream. You have to be careful what you dream—it can come true. At least now I know the potential is there to win a gold. In anything the only limiting factor is the mind. You have to believe in yourself.

T&FN: *What would you ultimately like to achieve in the discus, a world record, a gold medal, No. 1 ranking?*

Powell: Gold.

T&FN: *None of the others?*

Powell: Gold. All three would be nice, sure, but the gold is the most important. You can lose your world record and top ranking but not your gold medal.

T&FN: *Would you be satisfied with a medal?*

Powell: Nope, gold. There's only one medal in the Olympics, only one medal the people remember, if they remember at all.

T&FN: *Maybe this is where consistency comes in—if you are consistent at a high level, these things will come.*

Powell: I think they do but the important thing, obviously, is throwing the discus. If my throwing improves, as I believe it can and will, the potential is much greater that I will achieve all three. But you don't get anything just by thinking about it. It's all dependent on my throwing. □