

US Athlete of the Year

KATE SCHMIDT

Interviewed
by Garry Hill

Track-wise, it wasn't that good a year for Kate Schmidt. Those 14 months or so between July of 1976 and August of 1977. There was the disappointing bronze-medal finish at Montreal, surgery, and a 1977 summer with 6 more losses to Ruth Fuchs, not to mention a couple to upstart Tessa Sanderson.

Indeed, there were those who were joking that Schmidt's appellation of "Kate The Great" should be modified to "Kate The Mediocre."

The jokes stopped on September 11th, when Schmidt stepped to the line in Furth, West Germany, and suddenly supplanted arch-rival Fuchs as world record holder. The multitudes who had been saying for years that Schmidt should be the world record holder were finally right, even if at 227-5 she is still short of the grandiose 250 many think she can hit.

It was completely without warning, one of the most suprising records of this or any year. After 3 months of long travel, of throwing as much in a week as she used to in a month, and of too many late nights of frolic, Schmidt was suddenly on top...

Back in the States, it was time for a return to the real world. Kate Schmidt, javelin thrower, became Kate Schmidt, student, the self-stated top dog in her class in Long Beach State's communications department.

Down came the strength, off came almost 20 pounds as her head went into the books. In early November came a business conference in San Francisco, which tied in nicely with a visit to T&FN.

The road to our offices was about as tough as that to world record holder. In the 400-odd mile stretch of road between greater L.A. and the Bay Area, Schmidt managed to get a speeding ticket; to run out of gas; and to get stuck in a field while circling around a traffic jam.

But that's all in a day's work when you are used to traveling on the European circuit, and 9 hours on the road hadn't diminished her spirits at all. Recuperating over some of California's noted juice of the grape at our favorite creperie, we got the lowdown from America's only woman world record holder; in her typically exuberant fashion:

T&FN: In March of 1976 you told me that you wouldn't be that surprised if something like this happened. That the 10-December 1977

year following one of really hard work seems to produce good results.

Schmidt: That's my theory. I worked my ass off in 1972 and then broke the American Record 4 or 5 times in 1973 when I didn't do anything.

I worked really hard for Montreal. I was strong as an ox and I'd been working on my technique. So I went to hell in Montreal. But that's history.

So I expected 1977 would be a great year. I didn't train from September until April. I knew I was going to have my foot cut in January.

T&FN: When did you find that out?

Schmidt: In Montreal. I had to have cortisone injections for the pain. It was a neuroma that had to be cut out.

I knew that there was no point in training before the surgery since I would have to be off my feet for so long afterwards. Then it got infected, so my recovery took longer than usual.

I figured it was just going to be an old

the worst season I've ever had.

T&FN: I know there's a great story behind your world record.

Schmidt: Furth was on a Sunday. On Thursday I threw in Belgium and I didn't throw very far. It was raining and freezing cold and late at night. I threw 190-something.

T&FN: A typical 60-meter throw?

Schmidt: No, a typical 59-meter throw.

The next day I had to travel to London, which I was dreading because of the air strike. So I figured I'd never get there. I'd never be able to throw for all the money they wouldn't be paying me anyway. But the connections ended up perfect. Again we threw at night, and Tessa [Sanderson] beat me on the last throw as usual. Everybody beat me on the last throw all summer.

The next day, I had to get to Nuremburg, which is next to Furth. Again I anticipated not getting there at all because of the airstrike. Got to Heathrow at 8:00 in the morning for a 9:30 flight. Went to passport control, and once you are through there they won't let you out. We didn't leave until 5:30.

Stuck in the little lounge, drinking, playing backgammon. I just rolled with it.

They kept announcing delays, but everybody just shrugged their shoulders. We drank some more, ate some more shortbread, bought some more souvenirs. We thought, "Who cares? We're going home in two days anyway." This was Saturday, and I was leaving for home at 7:30 Monday morning and I was psyched.

Finally, we rolled into Frankfurt at about 8:00. Bus to Nuremburg which gets there about midnight. At 2:00 the next afternoon we had to throw in Furth.

No javelins, they were lost at

Heathrow. I was quite pleased, because I didn't want to have to take them home anyway because they're a pain. I'd been hoping to lose them a short time before I had to go home.



flush-down-the-toilet year because I didn't have the time to train. I had completely wasted away. I was totally inflexible.

All summer, except for a couple of meets, I threw in the 190s. It was probably

Perfect timing.

But there were 4 women throwers and only 2 javelins, so I warmed up with [former world decathlon record holder] Kurt Bendlin's.

So this thing is a combination of very interesting emotions: I was psyched to go home (psyched equals adrenalin); I was relaxed because I was exhausted; I was also thinking that I wouldn't have to throw again until April so I might as well go balls-out because it didn't matter if I hurt myself—so I was very reckless. I've never had that combination of such concentration.

T&FN: *You've always had a good hand with the men's javelin. After all, you can throw it more than 200 feet.*

Schmidt: I didn't touch the women's javelin until I got onto the runway for the competition. Between throws I kept warming up with the men's. It felt so good I wanted to throw the men's in competition.

T&FN: *What's good about the men's implement?*

Schmidt: Well, it felt good warming up with it because I was pulling on it. It's heavier than a women's javelin, so I had to pull on it, which I never do with the women's because it's too light. And I was going fast, which helps a lot, and I was keeping my hand up.

T&FN: *Why were you going fast?*

Schmidt: Because of the recklessness. Nothing mattered.

T&FN: *Using all of your 14-flat speed.*

Schmidt: 16-flat speed. Miki [Miklos Nemeth, the men's world record holder] said I looked much quicker than normal, and I figured that if Miki said it, it must be true. He's quite critical.

I was talking at the head of the runway and stuff. Saying, "Hey, watch this you guys." I was chatting to them as I rolled down the runway. The first throw was 202 or so. It felt good.

Miklos was still making sarcastic remarks about my technique. I thought, "Screw him." Second throw was about 207. I said, "You guys, that felt pretty good." I wanted some encouragement.

Miklos just rolled his eyes and made another sarcastic remark.

Maren [Seidler] said, "You might as well go out in a blaze of glory."

I said, "I feel like I have a big one in me today." I started thinking that I wanted to throw 64 meters like I did early in the year. After such a garbage summer, 210 would be OK. It was also a must for me to beat Tessa before I went home.

I got to the head of the runway for my third throw and I said, "OK, Miklos." I'm running down the runway and talking to him, "Watch this, watch that, blah, blah, blah." I felt so good. So quick, so together. Nothing mattered. Just, go for it, Kate.

And I did.

When I released I felt the effort and strain, which is unusual. Good throws are

Bible of the Sport

usually very efficient.

I said to Miklos, "Maybe 64-65 meters?"

T&FN: *But there were no lines on the field marking distance, right?*

Schmidt: No, so the crowd didn't go crazy or anything. Miklos didn't raise an eyebrow, he just said, "I think this is a new record."

I said, "What record?"

He said, "A new world record."

I went over and kicked him. I thought he was giving me more crap about my technique. Nobody was reacting, so I had no cause to think anything was happening.

Then they put 69.34 on the board. I asked them what they were doing. They didn't know Miklos, they didn't know me, so why were they giving me a bad time? They had a deadpan look, as if they didn't even know they were joking.

Then I heard "neun und sechsig" over the PA and I said to myself, "What the hell are they doing? What did they say that for? The record is 69.10."

So I went over to the tape, and there was 69-30-something [69.32]. Oh! God! Was I excited. I just started cussing and saying, "I don't believe it!"

I stopped relating to what was happening at that point in time. It felt just like one time when I was in a car-crash. The moment before I broadsided this guy I just went petrified. It was the same sort of thing, and I just didn't know how to handle it.

For the last 10 years—my whole career—I have thought about what it would feel like to break the world record. I was so overwhelmed, having thought about it for 10 years. All those thoughts fell on me at once and I just couldn't handle it.

Then Maren and I started screaming at each other and I ran around like a chicken with my head cut off, saying, "I can't believe it, I can't believe it..." Just nonstop. Dwight came over from the high jump and Mike Tully came over from the vault. Tom Jennings came out of the stands looking like a zombie.

"What's this world record talk?" he asked. Everybody thought they were joking, that I was teasing everyone.

I put on my sweats and said, "No more throws, that's it." But nobody has any film of my record throw so a half hour later I took another one from 7 steps.

T&FN: *The grapevine tells us that your record toss was poorly marked. However, it was poorly marked to your detriment—the officials may have cheated you out of several feet.*

Schmidt: That's OK. It's still a world record. What does bother me is that there was a tailwind, and with a headwind it probably would have been over 70 meters. The only thing that would have been nicer than that is if Fuchs had been there too. Then I would have had an orgasm.

I could have died 3 minutes later and my life would have been fulfilled. □



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