

# KEN FLAX

T&FN Interview  
by Jon Hendershott



John Gualifera

**K**evin Costner has nothing on Ken Flax. In *Field Of Dreams*, the award-winning actor played a man obsessed with building his own diamond to recapture a spirit of baseball's past.

Flax's own dream of becoming America's best hammer thrower once led him to build his own throwing circle—in a vacant lot in yuppified Marin County, across the Golden Gate from San Francisco. The Oregon grad won the TAC title after training much of 1990 in his personal ring.

Such is the extent of Flax's single-minded pursuit of his hammer dream that he once sold a stock portfolio so he could continue to train.

The dream became reality in 1991 as Flax was the first-ever U.S. finalist at the Worlds, placing 7th in Tokyo. He capped the year by rating No. 9 globally, the first American to gain World Ranking in 21 years.

It was Flax's eighth consecutive year among the U.S. Top 10, his second straight season as the No. 1 American.

The dream continues in '92, with Olympic aspirations of course. There are diversions for Flax: as throwing coach at Cal, representing Nike shoes and Oakley sunglasses, even appearing in a *Minutemaid* ad.

But everything really takes a backseat to Flax's intense focus on the hammer. Flax admits that, for now, his life doesn't extend beyond 4 p.m. on June 24 in New Orleans—the time of the hammer final at the Olympic Trials:

**T&FN:** Some people might think of '92 as a two-meet season, the Trials and Olympics. But it's really a one-meet season—if you don't make the team, you don't get to the Games.

**Flax:** Right. If you don't make the team, the year is a failure. It's that important a meet. People keep telling me, "Oh, you're a shoo-in. It's you, Jud and Lance, and that's that." But, hey, if you're injured, it might not be you.

So I always play the role of the pessimist. I say, "Ranking No. 9 last year was great; placing 7th in the Worlds was great, but in reality if Jim Driscoll had thrown well at TAC, all that might not have happened."

Jim really is the guy who can take the role of spoiler. So it's always a dog fight—and this year it all counts on that one

day in New Orleans.

The thing about all of us is we all have the utmost respect for each other. We know that on a given day any of us can win. It's happened in the past—but I hope it doesn't happen in the future!

**T&FN:** Back in '85, after you set your first American CR, you said you enjoyed the underdog role. It sounds like you still do.

**Flax:** Yes, never taking a thing for granted. Especially after my two prime rivals have thrown 80-feet with the weight already. Regardless of how that might translate to hammer distances, it tells me both are in phenomenal shape and ready to throw the hammer far.

It's funny, but I've already forgotten I ranked No. 9 in the world. That's past and has no bearing at all on this year. So I always play the pessimist.

**T&FN:** Exactly why?

**Flax:** I feel if that you take the optimist's role, there is a tendency to relax. You get those survival instincts going when you're the underdog. You've got to fight to prove yourself.

My philosophy always has been just to concentrate on what it takes for me to throw far. If I focus all my energy on doing that the best I can, then everything else—a team place, medals, rankings, whatever—should follow.

**T&FN:** Yet you still must be pleased to have been World Ranked last year, the first American in 21 years.

**Flax:** Oh sure. I still have my first diary from when I was a frosh at Oregon. To me, things like goals are very personal. It does no good to say, "My goal is to throw 280-feet." You're just setting yourself up to be shot down.

But one of the goals I did list was to be World Ranked. I kept that as a kind of secret goal. I felt if I trained hard and did a lot of things right, it could become a reality. I felt I could help U.S. hammer throwing get back up there.

**T&FN:** You did last year.

**Flax:** Well, anything I'm personally involved with, I want to see it succeed. This is one of them because it's a big part of my life—just as I want to see the sport succeed.

It's a great feeling to rank, but it's behind me. The slate is clean and everybody's equal until the meets roll around. I just have to train harder than I've ever trained before and make sure I can repeat that ranking, or improve on it.

**T&FN:** Why was there that big gap between Americans in the Rankings? Why did



the U.S. lag behind?

**Flax:** I'm not sure but you could look at it like that, outside of the foursome of myself, Jud, Lance and Jim, American hammer throwing hasn't really improved that much.

For a young athlete to spend the time lifting all those weights, throwing out in some field all by himself and not having much guidance—which is what American hammer throwers chronically suffer from—there's not a lot of incentive to put in all that effort when you know you'll end up way down in the placings.

On the other hand, it could just be the event. I mean, hammer throwing is a strange event—you're not going to get a lot of glory out of it, if any at all. There just isn't the incentive to put in the thousands of hours of work that it takes to be World Ranked.

**T&FN:** Does it take a long time because it's so technical?

**Flax:** It's a full-time job. I'm fortunate that things went well enough last year so I could secure financial support this year—from people like Nike and the Olympic Committee—and can work at it full time now. Last year, I worked two part-time jobs, went to school for my MBA almost full time, plus trained. It was a tough load to carry.

**T&FN:** It must be quite a change to be able to devote all your time to the hammer.

**Flax:** With this being an Olympic year, I've gone back to the attitude I had in '86 when I was shooting for the collegiate title: at the end of this year, I don't want to be able to say, "What if?" What if I had thrown more, or lifted harder or whatever. I don't want to say that and I'm on that track this year.

**T&FN:** You said the hammer is a strange event and it does seem almost like a cult within the sport. What is the allure of it for you? What is it about the event that lets it become that full-time job, like life itself?

**Flax:** What drives me, I don't know, other than I don't know how to quit. If I choose to do something, I can't quit. When I have a goal, I feel like I'm cheating myself if I don't work to my utmost to achieve that goal.

Part of it also goes back to when I decided to go to college to throw the hammer. I had kind of a frustrating high school career in that people always told me I was too small to be a thrower. They said, "You can't do it." That made me think, "Oh yes, I can. I'll show you."

And later the attitude was, "You're an American hammer thrower. They have

never been good internationally. You still can't do it." So that still is a motivator.

**T&FN:** You've never bought the idea that small size hinders you. Or does a thrower just need good technique?

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**Flax:** There are different factors, like bigger guys have larger arms than me and therefore a bigger throwing radius. The comparison is that one inch of radius equals seven feet of distance.

So if I'm competing with a guy who is 6-4 and I'm 5-10, a six-inch difference in our arm radius figures out to quite a difference in the length of the throw.

But, basically no, I don't think of myself as a "small" guy. Like the old saying, "It's not the size of the person, it's the size of the desire." How's that for a one-liner?

**T&FN:** Great! Let's get it on a bumper sticker. You have said before that you consider Sergey Litvinov as your model.

**Flax:** Yes, he's always been the guy I model myself after. Like him, my focus is on technique and speed. The Soviets aren't out there just bashing the ball. They finesse it with a very specific technique and speed and that's what I try to follow.

**T&FN:** With all the changes in the former Soviet Union, there is the potential of a lot more of their hammer throwers being in the Olympics and Worlds. Does that impact your attitude at all, or are they just more guys you have to beat?

**Flax:** [laughs] "Adapt and improvise." That's my motto. Really, it's hard to say. A united team will have three throwers, plus the Baltic states could have Tamm from Estonia, Viluckis from Lithuania and maybe one or two more.

To hear and see what has happened over there—food shortages and all that—my feeling is, "Welcome to the real world, guys. You've gotta work for a living? Hey, I'm crushed." But you'll still see the big guys like Syedikh, who trains in Paris. Guys like that have taken care of their own situations.

But I really can't worry about them.

Every bit of my energy has to go into what will make me a better thrower. Whether the ex-Soviets are getting state support or not isn't my problem. It's out of my hands.

**T&FN:** How much longer can you chase your own dream?

**Flax:** It's getting thin. I can hardly believe another four years has gone by, because virtually every day that has gone by has been a financial struggle. I've used what I call the "B-B-S" model of finance: "Beg, Borrow or Steal."

My family's tired of me. But I feel like the guy in *Field of Dreams*, who's got this dream and it's crazy but he's going for it. My grandmother just shakes her head. It's like, "What is this guy doing? He doesn't have a job, yet he's out there throwing this thing."

But my parents understand that what I'm trying to do is commendable. I'm not out shooting people, I'm not in a gang, I'm not robbing people. But I am trying to make myself the very best I possibly can be in my chosen field.

**T&FN:** Is that how the hammer defines Ken Flax?

**Flax:** [laughs] Yeah, running around in circles. In the simplest terms, I'd say the hammer defines me as being focused, and intense enough to accept a lot of small, incremental goals that hopefully will lead to larger achievements. It defines me as being a perfectionist. There are components of goal setting, of being the best I can be.

It's hard to say because I really don't know who I am, honestly. There are some good ingredients that will carry me a long way in life. There's also a degree of being possessed in there; some tunnel vision, yes.

But I look at what I've learned from track and the parts are there to be very successful in whatever I choose to pursue out in the world. □

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Kenneth William Flax was born April 20, 1963, in San Francisco, and is 5-10/215. Graduated from Redwood High (Larkspur, Ca) in '81, and Oregon in '86. Currently represents Nike International.

Progression (World & U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Yr	Age	HT	Majors
'82	19	176-9	1)TAC Jr, 4)PA Jr
'83	20	210-7	13)NC
'84	21	229-9 (x, 9)	7)NC, 6)TAC, 7)OT
'85	22	244-5 (x, 2)	3)NC, 3)TAC, 7)WUG
'86	23	257-0 (x, 3)	1)NC, 4)TAC, 1)OF
'87	24	261-3 (x, 2)	3)TAC, 4)WUG, 20q)WC
'88	25	262-6 (x, 1)	1)TAC, 1)OT, 18q)OG
'89	26	256-1 (x, 2)	2)TAC, 3)WUG
'90	27	254-7 (x, 1)	1)TAC
'91	28	260-0 (9, 1)	3)TAC, 1)WUG, 7)WC