

Erik Kynard

by Jon Hendershott

Even though he is just 23, Erik Kynard has been a top-level high jumper for more than eight seasons. He first topped 7-feet at age 15 and competed internationally a year later.

Now the Kansas State grad has taken two NCAA and two USATF titles, as well as winning Olympic silver.

An intense competitor on the apron, he is relaxed and humorous off it. The Toledo native, who continues to work with college mentor Cliff Rovelto, is the latest in a star-studded group of jumpers to train in Manhattan, Kansas. And he brings his own whimsy to the event:

T&FN: After you won the '12 NCAA, you wore a gold crown you got at a Burger King. You said then that you planned to give it to whoever won, but then you won so you wore it yourself.

And at K-State, you were known for your purple-and-white striped socks. Were those things aimed at bringing the crowd to the high jump, or keeping you relaxed in competition, or both, or what?

Kynard: As far as the socks go, black and red were my high school's colors, so I wore black and red striped socks back then.

It's just been my own nod to the event in a uniform sense—I mean, you don't have much to work with in spandex as far as a uniform goes.

That whole crown thing... people think a lot of things I do are premeditated, as far as playing to the crowd. I just do what I want and if there are some consequences or repercussions, I just deal with them.

It's all emotion, basically. I'm passionate about the sport and the event. If I'm upset or frustrated one day, you'll see those emotions. If I'm having fun, it'll be more happy-go-lucky. It just depends on how I feel.

T&FN: So it's tied directly to the competition?

Kynard: Exactly. I'm not acting out any roles. At lower bars, you might see just a more relaxed, nonchalant Erik. As the competition gets more intense and the bar gets higher, though, you'll see more intensity.

T&FN: Do you feel you're fighting against the bar more than anything else?

Kynard: Yes. The competition is duly noted as far as what's done by the jumpers. But nobody knocks down the bar except me.

High jumping is a blood sport because at the end of the day, the bar always wins.

You're never victorious as far as self-achievement goes because you always end it by knocking down the bar. That's how you stop.

I always say that satisfaction in this event is overrated because you're never truly satisfied. You always jump and come so close but knock the bar down.

T&FN: As for bringing fans to the high jump, the Drake Relays this year is going to stage the event in a grocery store of sponsor Hy-Vee. Is that setup going to allow all the jumpers the chance to bring the crowd into the event more?

Kynard: [laughs] Well, I can say I won't go hungry! It's going to be close quarters, from what I hear, but yeah, it will be very interactive as far as the crowd goes. Grocery stores are usually pretty busy places, so I'm not concerned about a lack of attendance.

T&FN: You often get PR or equal-PR jumps in the really big meets: NCAA, USAs, Worlds, Olympics. Obviously you're very competitive, but have you always been a big-meet guy like that?

Kynard: I'd say so. I think it all boils down to that I'm not a fearful guy. I don't shy away from the spotlight or a challenge of a big competition. It's kind of

the complete opposite of my personality because I'm a soft-spoken, keep-to-myself kind of guy. But in competition, it's like, "This is my stage."

I got a tweet after the World Indoors, where I got 4th—the worst place possible. But this person, who I respect a lot, said he loved watching me because I always make people beat me. I never beat myself.

It was a thing of, "This guy always goes out with a fight. He makes you beat him." I'm a guy who is going to go out with a bang, with a fight.

T&FN: You said after the indoor Worlds that the event was a chess match and not a checker game. Is the psychological aspect something that especially appeals to you about the high jump?

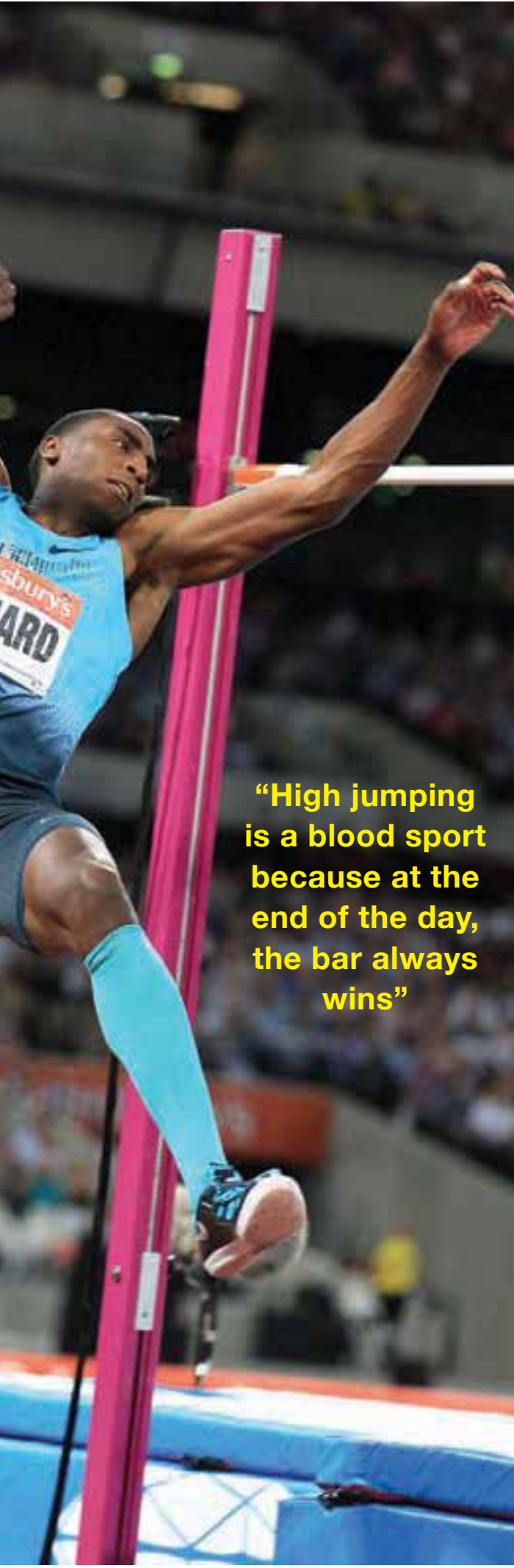
Kynard: It's very psychological. The high jump is 50% mental; maybe even 60/40 mental. It's a very physical event, yes, but if you aren't able to conquer your own mind, you won't be successful.

Kynard In A Nutshell

- Personal:** Erik Kynard Jr. was born on February 3, 1991, in Toledo, Ohio; 6-4½/194 (1.94/88)
- PRs:** Pro—7-9¼/2.37 '13 (=4, =12 A); College—7-8¾/2.36 '13 (=3, = 4 C)
- Schools:** Rogers HS (Toledo) '09; Kansas State '13; now represents Nike
- Coaches:** Eric Browning (Rogers HS); Cliff Rovelto (Kansas State, pro)
- Major Meets:** 2)USJ, nq)OT, nq)WJ '08; 2)USJ '09; 11)NCi, 6)NC, 3)USJ '10; 3)NCi, 1)NC, 3)US, nq)WC '11; 4)NCi, 1)NC, 2)OT, 2)OG '12; 3)NCi, 2)NC, 1)US, 5)WC '13; 1)USi, 4)WCi '14
- World/U.S. Rankings:** HJ—x/3 '11; 6/2 '12; 4/1 '13



VICTOR SAILER/PHOTO RUN



“High jumping is a blood sport because at the end of the day, the bar always wins”

There are guys who can jump high in smaller meets, but can't jump under pressure. Or once they miss, it's over because they can't make a bar when they're down.

I don't play chess, except for a little bit online. I'm not very good, actually. It's mentally stressing. But that's why I use that example with the high jump because it's not just simply jumping. It's a strategic event.

T&FN: *This is your first full season as a professional. Has that changed your and Cliff's approach to training and to looking at the whole season? Has it been much of an adjustment?*

Kynard: It sucks [laughs]. The indoor season sucked for me because I wasn't able to train, really. Me and coach talked about this after the Indoor and he said, "Man, you just didn't have enough training in." I had only three actual high jump practices on the year.

What people don't realize is that you can't jump all the time. When you train, you just don't go out and jump all the time.

In college, I competed every other weekend. Now as a pro, Cliff and I are still playing with the training. One thing is, I'm a workhorse. I'm getting after it now because we don't train for indoors per se.

So I'm training now—and it's simple but also difficult in my first pro season because there is no major championship to aim for this year. So it's, "What am I training to peak my body for?"

Right now, my first meet is Drake and I'm just going back to square one in training. Coach worked all this out and he always has a plan. He's very knowledgeable—he's a genius as far as this event is concerned.

T&FN: *And he has coached so many great jumpers in the past—Matt Hemingway, Jamie Nieto, Nathan Leeper, Scott Sellers and currently Jesse Williams. But might this year be the "best" for you to have your first full pro season exactly because there isn't a major team to make?*

Kynard: Without a doubt. There is no pressure on me to make anything. There's no pressure on me to perform. The only goal that coach Rovelto and I have for this season is to

jump high and stay healthy. Be healthy when it's over. I'm not by any means trying to jump in 20 meets, because I want to do this for another 10 years. And I just turned 23. That's always been a part of the plan.

I told Cliff after the Olympics, "I'm definitely coming back to finish school. There's no way I'm ready to go out there on my own." He said, "I agree. I don't think you're ready either." So that was the end of that conversation! He kind of downplays our relationship, but I trust him 100%.

It's the same with meets: we look at a list and he says, "You're not doing this one and this one and this one" and I say, "OK."

No matter how much I might receive, at the end of the day, he is in charge because he knows the plan. He's been there before with other jumpers and his is a system that has been proven over time. Even a blind squirrel finds a nut every once in a while [laughs]—but Cliff is no blind squirrel.

T&FN: *For a year like this, with no major team to shoot for, does the Diamond League become the major goal to aim at?*

Kynard: Yeah, because it gives you something to look forward to because you know it's there. It's not like a meet that just pops up. I had some success on the circuit last year; I wouldn't say "great" success because I finished 2nd to [eventual AOY Bohdan] Bondarenko a lot. I had a little success.

But I'm a guy who's very hard on himself. I also don't believe that failure is final. But it was very tough to finish 2nd at that level, especially when you're jumping high. I'd jump 2.34 [7-8] and he'd jump 2.36 [7-8¾]; I'd jump 2.36 and he'd jump 2.40 [7-10½].

Also I've been going and going almost since '08. So I think this year, I deserve a little easier season.

T&FN: *But what do you feel you have to do to gain 5 more centimeters to get up even with those guys?*

Kynard: I just have to take off better. My position has to be better. I think that physically, as far as leaving the ground and going over the bar, I'm good physically. I bring so much speed to the bar, it's like... if there's a banana peel, it's over [laughs].

T&FN: *Is Cliff's coaching experience and ability to keep things in perspective one of the biggest pluses of the Manhattan? How have you benefited from the overall situation there?*

Kynard: I've benefited immensely because it's so competitive. If you're not competing with someone who is physically here, you're competing with a guy who's been here before. You're competing with the numbers: what others have lifted, or their testing results, or running workout results. Like I said, I'm a workhorse, so coach is able to say, "Aw, that's nothing. Matt did this."

But I've worked toward that point. It's great because I'm able to see what Jesse did in his week of training, so I can decide if I need to step it up.

It's easy to be humble, especially when training is hard. And we work hard. It's so systematic; it's like a foolproof plan. It's also

Kynard — continued

specific to each one, their strengths and also weaknesses. But I'm not a guy who needs much motivating anyway. I'm so competitive, I'm the guy coach has to tell to slow down.

T&FN: Does the high jump reflect Erik Kynard as a person? You're obviously motivated and driven on the track, but how about off?

Kynard: Sometimes, I'm referred to as being an "old man." But the event is like me as far as being more mystical and graceful because I'm that way at times. As far as competing, I'm just grateful I have someplace where I can be... out of my mind [laughs].

T&FN: Have you yet been able to assess the effect of having won the Olympic silver medal?

Kynard: I never set out to win silver at the Olympics. That never was a goal of mine. I was always trying to win gold. But coach always told me, "Hey you're in the final; anybody can win. You're in the final, you're in the mix. It doesn't matter where they pick you."

In fact, the screensaver on my phone was the prediction where I was just in "others to watch." I used that as a motivator. And Cliff was right: you get in the final and you have as good a chance to win as anybody.

Coach told me, "Don't miss. Stay clean. Just go do what you do and have fun." Don't try to reinvent the wheel and I'd be fine. Cliff has never given me a big, rah-rah speech. He just says what I need to do and if I'm messing up, he'll correct me. The toughest times are when you're doing things right because there isn't anything to say.

T&FN: Now, do people recognize you in Manhattan or back home in Ohio? Or do you even worry about that?

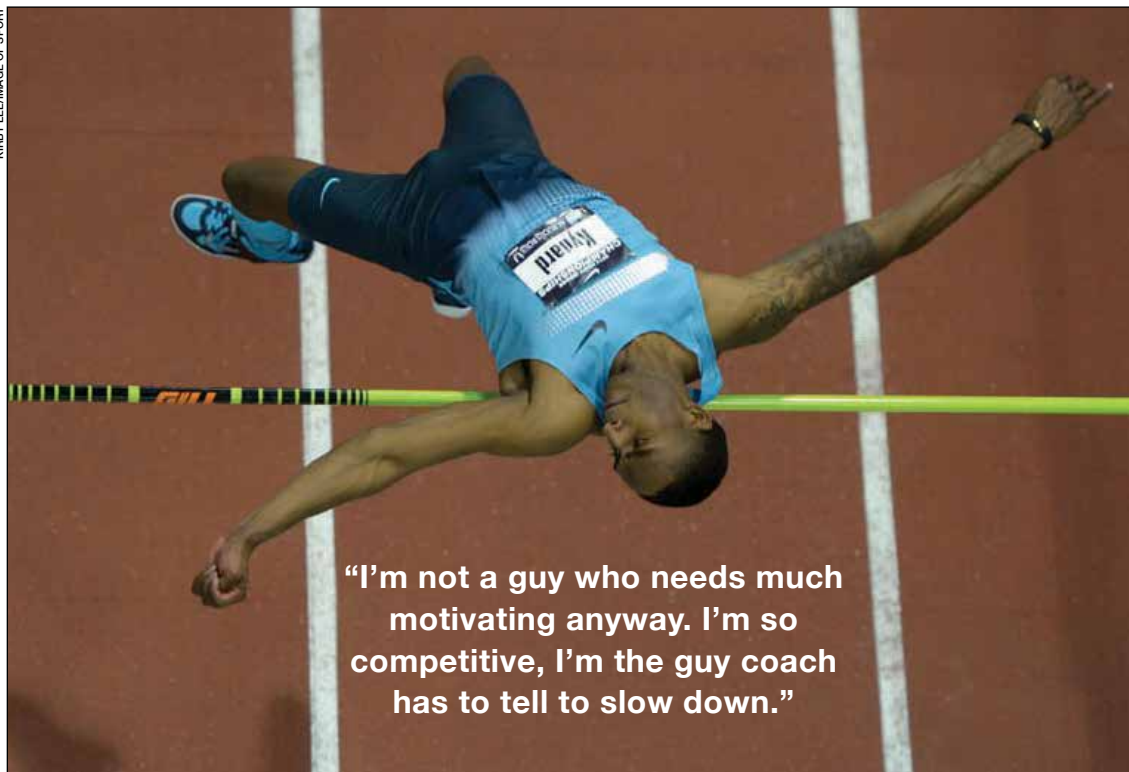
Kynard: I don't worry about that stuff.

Anonymity is so undervalued. You'd be surprised how irritating it is to have someone come up while you're trying to enjoy a meal and ask for a picture. But I understand that it happens; it comes along with the territory and I think I've been able to handle it pretty well.

make in the future?

Kynard: He talks about it a lot more than he has in the past. Usually, you just think that the heights will come. But he has said, "Man, you can jump 2.43 [7-11¼], 2.44 [8-0]. You've got all the tools. You can jump 2.40-plus easy.

KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT



"I'm not a guy who needs much motivating anyway. I'm so competitive, I'm the guy coach has to tell to slow down."

But it's nothing I look for. I aspire to inspire, by my actions on the track and off the track. I never set out to be just an Olympic silver medalist. Even when I hear that now, I think, "Man, that's all you got? That sucks." But I've been at two World Championships since then and it's like, "Dude, you have only one medal. You need to get it together."

T&FN: Since there is much more to achieve, do you and Cliff talk about goals of specific heights to

Just do this right or that right."

He talks about it—but we don't put a time line on it. It isn't something that I need to focus on. You'd drive yourself crazy doing that. I just train and when the competition comes, if it's going to happen, it will happen. Dwelling on one special thing can be so counterproductive. I did that in the past and it wasn't positive. Just win—I'd rather win jumping 2.31 [7-7] than lose at 2.41 [7-10¾]. □

On His Biggest Rivals

Bohdan Bondarenko: "I've jumped against Bondarenko a lot, but he has never had as much success as he had last year. As far as strengths and weaknesses, I don't know, because I've never seen him as strong as he was last year.

"He was just so special and wasn't ever like that before. But I've seen that his approach is very consistent, which is a big deal in the high jump. He runs the same approach every time."

Mutaz Essa Barshim: "His body is so crazy, man. He has a rangy body like mine, but I'm taller. He's definitely the lightest of all of us [154/70]. Obviously, he has amazing jumping ability. Cliff [Rovelto] says that me and him hit the bar at the same place all the time. Which I haven't paid attention to,

because I don't notice how other guys miss.

"But because he has a different body type, I don't think he's as strong as other jumpers are. I believe he has some back issues, so he can't jump as much as everybody else.

Ivan Ukhov: "He is very strong. He is kind of the unorthodox jumper out of the bunch because he is so strong. He's kind of a brute, because he's strong and just muscles over the bar. He also does other things differently. Like he doesn't wear high jump shoes; his shoes look like custom-made sprint shoes.

"Yes, he jumped a lot of heights at his six meets before indoor Worlds. But, honestly, I don't think he jumped enough in Poland. He passed a lot of bars.

"But he needed three tries to make 2.38 [7-9¾] but Barshim cleared on his first. So it didn't matter what he jumped last week or if he was over 2.40 [7-10½] a dozen times. He

still was 2nd. What mattered was he didn't jump 2.40 that day.

Derek Drouin: "It's been very interesting with Derek because there's more history there than people realize. We go back to the '09 Pan-Am Juniors. He might be one of the best things to happen in my career because I was a guy who had no experience at losing.

"I learned how to lose from Derek, when I was a senior in high school. He beat me at the Pan-Ams and I had never experienced that before.

"Losing definitely is a learned experience. You do have to go through it. It is very bitter, but you just have to exhibit class at both results, winning and losing.

"I had to learn that failure, in fact, is not fatal. You can conquer future situations. So it was something that I learned late. I was a late-bloomer as far as losing is concerned."