





# MAC WILKINS

## T&FN Interview by Garry Hill

**I**mpressive. That's the word for Mac Wilkins. Impressive, physically, of course. When you are 6-4 and 260ish, with very little of that weight tied up in adipose tissue, you've got a body. And if you've seen Wilkins throwing the discus, then you've seen his grace and beauty as an athlete. Incredible speed and coordination combined with his immense strength.

And that grim visage, the piercing eyes probing you from atop the fierce beard. Waxing lyrical, I must say that the best possible description of Wilkins comes from William Blake's *The Tiger*:

Tiger, Tiger! Burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Yes, physically impressive. And what he has done with that body is equally impressive, as well-chronicled by T&FN. Check out his 1976 season in either the November '76 or January '77 issues. Olympic champion, 4 world records, etc., etc.

Just as impressive is what he has between his ears. A learned man, he briefly taught high school (economics, European history, US-Soviet relations) before settling on his career as a discus thrower.

One might ask, "If he's so intelligent, why 'd he say all those dumb things last summer?" The answer is simple—he didn't. There was a lot of merit to his statements, as he is willing to tell all who will listen, and try to understand.

Those who question his motives might be surprised to learn that his prime concern is the state of his sport (our sport) in America.

Mac Wilkins is for track.

It was a meteoric rise that he enjoyed in 1976, coming from the great milieu of "world-class" discus throwers to the top.

He was disappointed in early 1976 when we did a story on him, but didn't give him a chance at a question-and-answer interview. He was so eager when we asked him this time that he bubbled with excitement.

"I've got a great idea," he ventured. "We're going to do this a bit differently. I'm going to ask the questions and you have to give the answers."

After we satiated his Bunyanesque appetite with some curried lamb and beer, we began:

**T&FN:** What's your first question?

**Wilkins:** Well, here's my first answer; you'll have to think of a question. That's the way I'll conduct the interview. I was thinking this is the proper time in the development of my image to spring the attack on Jesse Owens.

**T&FN:** I don't think we want to really get into that. However, you have expressed a certain antipathy towards him. Would you care to expostulate?

**Wilkins:** Right. Every time he opens his mouth he sets track and field in the US back 40 years. He's got nothing to complain about; he's got it made. He gets to travel around, spouting all the USOC programs—which are nonexistent. He says

we have the best system in the world. That's ridiculous. He's back in the 1930s, which is fine, because that was his time. He just reinforces everybody who thinks that way.

He hasn't made any statements yet, that I'm aware of, on the President's Commission Report [see p. 47]. It'll be pretty interesting to see what he has to say.

**T&FN:** That's a nice blunt way to get started.

**Wilkins:** Well, I don't have all the answers here yet; you'll have to ask a few questions.

**T&FN:** Why are you so blunt?

**Wilkins:** Because I have no time for these idiots. Basically, when I was involved with the hassles back in Montreal I really saw how these people operate; the kind of people I was dealing with. Not all of them, but many of them were very small people. Very petty. The only way they would have any control over me would be because of their position, not because of the people they are.

**T&FN:** Are you this blunt in all walks of life?

**Wilkins:** No, I'm a little more direct sexually. No, seriously, I've never really had the platform before. Nobody listens to the No. 2 guy in America. But if it's the No. 1 guy—they listen. I could have said a lot of these things 2 years ago but who wants to listen to the No. 2 discus thrower in the US in a non-Olympic year?

**T&FN:** In other words, you aren't expressing new-found feelings, you're just dealing from a position of strength.

**Wilkins:** Right. Now that I've got a platform, I'm going to speak. And after the things that happened to me before Montreal, I have my position better clarified. The things I want to say are more sharply defined now.

That was one small thing that made me decide that I had a responsibility to the sport to speak my mind.

**T&FN:** Briefly, what happened before Montreal?

**Wilkins:** The treatment that Al Feuerbach and I received.

**T&FN:** Your wanting to set up your own training programs, as to where and when? And you felt you were stymied by the USOC?

**Wilkins:** Yes, by their inflexibility. We originally made the request in November of 1975. We made it again in Eugene at the Olympic Trials and up and down the line at Plattsburgh and we received either "No," "I don't know," or "We're working on it." Finally, we decided that if we were going to compete in the Olympic Games, we would only compete if we were prepared in the manner we thought proper. If we couldn't, we were willing to take the chance of not being able to compete.

**T&FN:** Do you think all athletes should have this right? When do we decide what's right for the athlete and when it isn't?

**Wilkins:** Good question. Obviously, not everyone is capable of doing this and not everyone would want to. A lot of people would be eliminated because they need to train at the Olympic site because of the facilities . . . I don't know how you would do it. I just wish that provisions would be made for people who prefer this option. They would have a coach/supervisor, whatever they needed. Face it, the coaching staff isn't going to tell you what to do anyway, unless you're young and inexperienced.

**T&FN:** Suppose you hadn't met any opposition and had been able to set up your own training schedule. Do you think you still might have popped off the way you did?

**Wilkins:** I think I still would have made the comments I made but I don't know if they would have had as much bite to them. I still would have been critical of the situation in the United States but it would have been much more of a social comment than a direct criticism.

**T&FN:** What you said aroused such an incredible furor. I don't know if you were misquoted or what, but a lot of people came away with the idea that you are a pinko-Commie sympathizer. The specter of Communism was raised greatly. You made statements about East Germany.

**Wilkins:** I knew the effect of my statements and I knew what I was saying was the truth. However, I wasn't furnishing all the background, all the sidelights that would make it completely understood. To a degree, therefore, the statements were taken somewhat out of context.

I knew that, and I knew that because of this they would have a much stronger impact; but I didn't really care. I knew some people would be able to put 2 and 2 together, while others would react very strongly and would be so upset with their blind emotional rage that they wouldn't even be able to see there might be a little bit more to the story. I think the



President's Commission Report helps fill out my story.

I didn't want to make it boring and lose those idiots with the 10-second attention spans.

**T&FN:** *Why don't you clarify what you meant about the East Germans "winning all the medals except the discus"?*

**Wilkins:** They put a lot of work and dedication into it and I felt they deserved success and I like to see efficiency rewarded. I can't stand to see human resources wasted. That's why I'm so disturbed about the situation in the US. It's so terribly inefficient.

I approach my sport with a great professional attitude and a lot of integrity. I don't think the USOC is run the same way and I find it very frustrating.

**T&FN:** *Would you consider yourself a "patriotic American"?*

**Wilkins:** Well, in the normal sense no, but in my sense I would say yes. In the way of what I think patriotic is, yes. But in the way of normal everyday jerks' terms I don't think so. I don't express my patriotism in conventional manners because I think they are shallow.

**T&FN:** *Blind faith?*

**Wilkins:** That's it. "My country right or wrong" has no place in my thinking. I don't think that's a patriotic point of view.

**T&FN:** *You became a whipping boy at Montreal. A lot of newspeople decided "Oh boy! Here's our turkey for the Games. We're really going to get on this guy." Do you think they extrapolated further from comments you really made, deleted parts of what you said, on purpose?*

**Wilkins:** Of course. It's appalling the power that some people have because of a title after their name, because they have a typewriter in front of them. Whatever they say is swallowed by millions of people as the gospel truth. Yet they are sadly out of touch, they have no idea what the situation in regards to amateur sport is in the United States.

**T&FN:** *You got a lot of hate-mail after that. It followed you all over the country. But I noticed when they introduced all the Olympians at the San Francisco Examiner meet that you got one of the biggest hands; no boos. Has the mood changed?*

**Wilkins:** I think it has, as time reveals additional facts, such as the President's Commission and the Squaw Valley Training Center.

**T&FN:** *Does having fan appeal mean much to you?*

**Wilkins:** I seemed to get along pretty well without it before 1976. I don't think it's really a good thing because the people who would be making me a hero would probably be doing it only because I'm on top at that time. That doesn't appeal to me. It's not something that I'm going to try and play to. You know, not unless I'm Bruce Jenner and I've got an image that I'm trying to sell. I would just like to see more people thinking about sport the way I do.

**T&FN:** *Then what is the big force*  
16-February 1977

*that keeps you going?*

**Wilkins:** Welllll, I've always said that my main motivation is to throw the thing as far as I can. And I still think I can throw it significantly farther than 232-6 (or 70 meters 86, as the majority of the world says; other than a few backward races, principally *Americanus Erectus*). Now that I'm No. 1, maybe staying No. 1.

**T&FN:** *What do you want to do with the rest of your life?*

**Wilkins:** Right now it seems like there's nothing as much fun as throwing the discus. I've mentioned things like going to chiropractic school. But that seems like a job. Right now, I have no desire to go back to teaching, either. Maybe I'll get turned on to making money. It'll just be a game to make money but I think that has a lot of pitfalls.

Hey! I just had a thought. All this stuff recently about the selling of Moscow TV rights . . . It's just, wow. After talking with Roone Arledge in Montreal and watching the last two Games on TV and despising what they are doing to my sport, and to Olympic sports in general. And the amount of control they have over the Olympic Games . . .

**T&FN:** *How do you support yourself these days?*

**Wilkins:** Right now I'm still selling Karhu shoes; I have connections where I can sell discuses; I will be selling German weight-training equipment soon, and the club is allowed to give us so much per month.

**T&FN:** *You certainly have affected a Spartan lifestyle.*

**Wilkins:** You can't change your image overnight. All you need is a roof, maybe a car. I've got a bed and two barrels with a door on them for a table. That's all I've got for furniture in my apartment. That's all I need.

**T&FN:** *Getting back to your future. Can you keep up the training grind? How much do you train?*

**Wilkins:** Lots. I trained harder this December than I did in December of 1975. Like in a 3-week period where I took only 2 days off training; most days had 2 workout sessions. Of course, I'm in a position to spend time on it now; I might not be later. Maybe I won't need year-round sunshine.

My total physical activity is 4¼ to 5 hours and there is lots of mental preparation. I spend even more time thinking about my event than I do training. I know I'm really into it when I spend all my free time thinking about it.

**T&FN:** *What else is there in your life? How much time do you have for things like reading, going to movies?*

**Wilkins:** Things like that are important to me, but I seem to have so many things in my daily routine.

**T&FN:** *Somehow, this interview doesn't seem as well structured, as I'd like; it's a bit too free-form.*

**Wilkins:** That's because we have a different format, with two people

conducting the interview.

**T&FN:** *You haven't been holding up your end. You haven't been answering your fair share of questions.*

**Wilkins:** No, but I've been answering a lot of questions that haven't been asked.

**T&FN:** *Even though T&FN gave you 1976 season pretty good publicity, good play to your stats, you still don't think that even we did justice to your season. It was better than the raw stats.*

**Wilkins:** That's true and I have some more figures. In 37 meets I lost two, and in only 5 others were there ones where only one throw was good enough to win; 30 times I had at least two throws good enough to win.

And I had very few really favorable winds. I threw over 220 under all kinds of conditions. I had several throws much more significant than my world record.

My 70 meters at Nice was probably the best. It would have gone at least 10 feet farther in San Jose. But that wasn't a perfect throw either. I think it's still possible to break the world record without a wind.

**T&FN:** *When did you "know" that you were going to be Olympic Champion?*

**Wilkins:** Probably a couple of days before. That's when it really hit me. My last big workout.

After losing to Schmidt in May, I didn't know if he was going to be throwing 235 or 240. But as the Games approached I saw he wasn't going to be up to his capabilities.

In my workout I had a couple of throws at 70 meters with a fairly stiff left-side breeze. Aleksandr Barishnikov told me I hit 72 meters [236-3]. Schmidt and Thiede were out on the field at about 65 meters and they saw where they landed. I think that was the end of the competition right there.

The next day, Wolfgang didn't warm up there, he warmed up on another field. That was good—I threw crappy.

**T&FN:** *What about your relationship with Schmidt?*

**Wilkins:** A lot of people called it unpatriotic when I picked him up after his throw. An affront to Powell. It's funny, but nobody's ever asked me if I picked him up and was happy because it was a way of showing that I was relieved that he didn't beat me.

**T&FN:** *You've taken a lot of shots at the USOC in this interview, but you haven't said anything about the AAU.*

**Wilkins:** I consider it a real honor not to be nominated for the Sullivan Award.

**T&FN:** *OK, one last item. You were at a crucial point when the '72 Olympics came around, being a junior. You didn't make the team and your collegiate career ended the next year. You had to wait three long years for another chance; 99% of the people in that position quit.*

**Wilkins:** It meant too much to me to quit before I had my best. I didn't want to stop before I finished the job. And I still don't have the job finished. □