

Tim Mack

"I've got to prepare a little better this year, especially if I'm going to go try 20-feet"

by Steve Bailey

Tim Mack epitomizes the tale of the tortoise and the hare. Just shy of his 32nd birthday he vaulted in his first Olympic Games and walked away with the gold medal and an Olympic Record.

From an upset victory at the Olympic Trials he went on to dominate the second half of the outdoor season, finishing with eight straight

wins overseas. With his 19-8¹/₂ (6.01) win at the Grand Prix Final in Monaco, he fixed himself in a tie for No. 7 on the all-time world list and became the No. 2 American.

In April Mack talked with T&FN about his jumping at Monaco, the support among the vault community and approaching the daunting outdoor WR height of 20-1³/₄ (6.14) set by Sergey

Bubka more than a decade ago.

T&FN: You missed this indoor season because of a calf injury, are you ready to compete outdoors soon?

Mack: Yeah. I think that I'm getting over this little injury and it's taken a little while to try and figure it out, but I had a successful practice today. So I think I'm maybe a week or two behind schedule, but that's not going to be too hard to make up. As of right now, I'll be competing in Japan in May.

T&FN: Will you be going back to the site of your PR?

Mack: Providing I'm healthy, I've always liked Monaco. I was so glad [the 6.01] was there because I've always loved the city and I love that track. Prince Albert was there and I had the opportunity to have dinner with him. It was pretty unbelievable. Definitely nothing I thought I was going to be doing.

T&FN: It seems that there is a unique form of camaraderie among vaulters.

Mack: Definitely, because we have to help each other out, especially in Europe. We depend on each other—borrowing poles, checking our steps. A lot of our coaches can't be there, so if you think you can do it by yourself you're in trouble.

T&FN: You said all of the elite U.S. vaulters make a point to attend the Reno Summit. Is it a way to share information or is it more for the next generation of jumpers?

Mack: As far as being helpful, it's both. We get to see everybody; we get to listen to coaches, to other training methods. And at the same time younger people coming up see us there.

So it takes away some of the mystique of the top guys in the U.S. They see that neither Toby [Stevenson] nor I are really the superfast vaulters out there. But they see that we work hard, and that we have different styles of jumping, but we're both successful.

That's the joy of the pole vault. Yeah, you have to be kind of fast and you have to be kind of strong, and have to be kind of gymnastically skilled. Maybe somebody is better in one of those

areas than others, but the beauty is that you can work on so many different facets that will make you better.

T&FN: For most Olympians that are your age, it's not their first time around. But now we're starting to see athletes who at 40 are competing as well or better than anyone.

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Mack: I think people are realizing that recovery is real important. They're experimenting with different techniques. When I started to get massage, that was the best thing that ever happened to me. And I get a regular chiropractic treatment.

One of the little things I've learned is that I need to be heavier in the beginning of the season because as it progresses my weight will drop from the stress and everything. You figure things like that out over time.

T&FN: You coached the pole vault for a while after graduate school. How was that?

Mack: It's unbelievable. There's no substitution for repetition and when I'm coaching I'm reminding myself constantly. I learned a lot testing out training techniques and seeing how it is affecting the kids.

I coached three state champions—one I worked with just a little—and also a state champion girl. Two guys and three girls vault for Tennessee now. So it's rewarding that they've taken it even further.

T&FN: Over time it seems that you have often been passed over and yet manage to keep forging ahead and somehow come out on top?

Mack: Yeah I wouldn't really wish my path on anybody, but I was lucky that the people sur-

rounding me were supportive, and my family. I just wanted to vault. It wasn't that I wanted to get a gold medal or be a medalist—it was at the back of my mind.

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Mack Facts

• **Personal:** born September 15, 1972, in Cleveland; currently lives and trains in Knoxville; 6-2/176 (1.88/80)

• **Coach:** Jim Bemiller

• **Education:** St. Ignatius, Cleveland '91; Tennessee '95 (bachelors in Education after two years at Malone; later masters in Human Performance & Sports Studies)

• **Club:** Nike

• **Stats:** PV—19-8¹/₂ (6.01) '04 (=7, x W; 2, =4 A)

• **Major Honors:** 1)NCI, 6)NC '95; 4)USI, 8)OT '00; 2)US, 9)WC, '01; 1)USI, 2)US '02; 3)USI, 3)US, =6)WC '03; =6)USI, 1)OT, 1)OG '04

• **World & U.S. Ranks:** '98—x, 8; '00—x, 6; '01—x, 5; '02—5, 2; '03—10, 3; '04—1, 1

The Art Of Jumping For Records

After his PR 19-8¹/₂ (6.01) in Monaco Tim Mack took one attempt at an American Record 19-10¹/₂ (6.06) then moved the bar up, giving himself only two attempts at the WR height of 20-2¹/₂ (6.16). Why?

Mack: 6.06 was the next logical step because it would have been the second-highest jump for an individual. So I took a pretty good jump there and moved the bar up. I probably made a little mistake because 6m [19-8¹/₄] was always the goal and I didn't know what I was going to do after that, but I had some help from the other vaulters.

I just went up to everybody—Jeff [Hartwig], [Tim] Lobinger and Toby [Stevenson] and Derek [Miles]—and asked. They recommended 6.16 because of the good conditions. Toby said, "I don't say this all the time, but you can really do this." That felt good to hear. I was almost laughing because I couldn't believe I was taking a jump at 6.06 or 6.16.

I hit the bar going up [at 6.16] and quite frankly there wasn't a chance I was going to clear it, but it didn't seem that high. I've got to prepare a little better this year, especially if I'm going to go try 6.10 [20-0].

rounding me were supportive, and my family. I just wanted to vault. It wasn't that I wanted to get a gold medal or be a medalist—it was at the back of my mind.

But what really helped was that I was always focused on trying to get physically better. It's

are so many young guys coming up: I can't totally abandon my training program because these guys are jumping high now. My program is to be ready at the end.

As the years go on—I've got 3 or 4 more left—I think I'll be jumping higher earlier be-

cause my technique is going to be more sound.

I'm finding that the injury is probably the best thing that could have happened to me. I know a lot of people say that, but it gives me a new appreciation for the event itself. Now I know that when I do get back I'm going to

"I'm watching Tiger Woods. I can tell he's in control—if something goes wrong, no big deal"



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T&FN: I read that Paul Burgess from Australia—who just joined the 6m club—was just beginning to focus on the mental aspects of competing. Do you believe that's something he picked up from you?

Mack: I'm probably not going to be telling you anything he wouldn't tell you, but I think he saw me compete and like any vaulter who wants to get better said, "Hey, he knows what he's doing." For the amount of time we've been able to spend with each other we're pretty good friends. I always thought he was going to jump high at some point.

I told him I used sports psychologists and it's very helpful. I don't know if I was the only one to tell him that. A lost part of training is the mental approach. You can be as gifted as possible.

Right now I'm watching Tiger Woods. I can tell he's in control—if something goes wrong, no big deal.

You just kind of collect yourself. I've learned a lot of this over the years. You can learn a lot in one year, but the things you learn become even more solid over 5 or 6 years and I know I can rely on that.

T&FN: [Burgess's] summer season is closing up just as the U.S. season begins.

Mack: He finished the year and took time off, but he was back pretty quick. That's the really difficult part because there

appreciate it even more and I'm going to take advantage of the times and the opportunities that I do have.

T&FN: Yours was one of only a handful of attempts ever at Bubka's World Record. Do you have any predictions for this year?

Mack: Well, I think someone's going to go 6.05, 6.06. It's not beyond the realm of possibilities. I'm hoping that I'm going to be one of them. I would say this year 6.06; in 2 or 3 years maybe 6.10. I'm sure people are going to be taking attempts at 6.10 soon, whether it's me or Toby or Burgess.

There's always going to be somebody on the way up. Maybe [Russia's Igor] Pavlov, he's been jumping very well. Tommy Skipper. He's a raw talent. It's just a matter of time for him. □