

T&FN INTERVIEW

Mike Powell

by Jon Hendershott

Conspicuous—make that very conspicuous—by his absence this indoor season, long jump WR holder Mike Powell skipped the undercover campaign to strengthen an ailing back, and equally to get a strong training base for the championship seasons ahead.

Powell admits it's tough to rein in his competitive instincts—and few athletes anywhere compete as intensely, or enthusiastically, as the 31-year-old Southern Californian.

How many times has the sport thrilled to a dramatic last-jump victory by Powell, followed almost immediately by a joyous, uninhibited celebration? Outgoing and personable, he personifies the old saw, "What you see is what you get."

An intense drive to succeed fires Powell. In his earlier days, he was known as "Powell the Foul" for his constant habit of scratching on monster jumps. But he worked and worked and cured himself of the problem.

He also discovered a reservoir of talent almost unmatched in the event—and it exploded at the '91 Worlds when Powell soared into history with his leap of 29-4½ (8.95) to break Bob Beamon's storied, quarter-century-old mark of 29-2½ (8.90).

Powell's consistency since Tokyo has made him simply the event's best—although the Olympic title remains frustratingly elusive. But Atlanta beckons, as does Göteborg, where Powell will seek his third consecutive global crown.

Those goals, as well as consistency at the highest competitive levels, are the exact reasons Powell concentrated this winter on regaining full health—as well as building a stronger training base than ever:

T&FN: *How are your health and your training right now?*

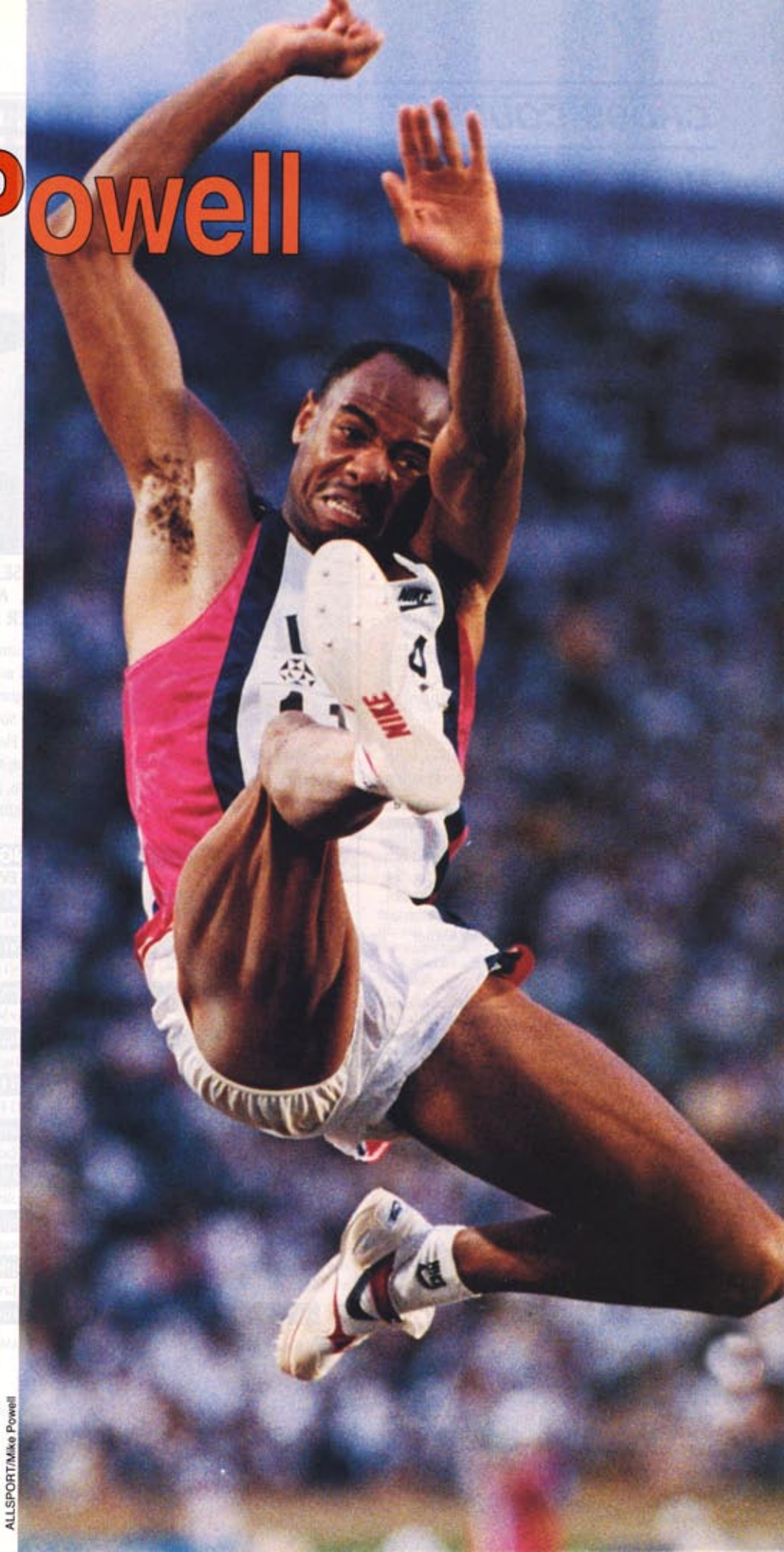
Powell: Healthwise, I feel great. Not only in '94, but also the two previous seasons, I was used to competing when I was hurt. I want to stop that; it isn't fun [laughs]. I took off the indoor season to focus on making sure my health lasts throughout the year. I've been doing a lot of rehab, therapy—and a lot of smart training.

T&FN: *What does "smart training" mean?*

Powell: I'm training with John Smith now, where Randy Huntington used to be my coach. But we were in two different places, him in Fresno and me down here. So he wasn't able to watch me train all the time.

I always had to judge things for myself. But I'm the type who always wants to work hard and there were times when I'm sure I did too much. I needed to back off a little bit.

I just played that game of: training/getting hurt/rehabbing/training again/getting hurt



ALLSPORT/Mike Powell

again/rehabbing again—and then the season came. So I always went into the season banged up and not properly prepared.

This year with John, we've slowed things down. I've gotten a bigger base. I went back to running the 300s, 400s and 500s, which I hadn't done since probably 1986. Those have been in addition to my usual training. So I've got more of a base underneath me this year.

T&FN: *You had a disk problem in your back.*

Powell: For the past few years, I tried to figure out exactly what it was. The problem basically comes from my lower back and hips. It's been limiting what I can do with my hamstrings. The problem has gone from the left side to the right, so it has been in both legs the last couple of years.

Basically, it's just taken time for me to really understand what's going on with my body. To balance my body out, do all the work and therapy—and be patient. It's been hard to be patient, because I saw the TV meets, heard about things that were going on and I just want to get out and compete.

T&FN: *In fact, is that how you put up with having to be patient, by taking the longer view?*

Powell: Yes, that's the only way I can do it. I have a hard time watching a meet, because I want to get out there and jump.

I'm a competitor and I want to compete. So it's been hard, but I have to look at the long view of the whole season—and especially next year.

I want to have the kinds of years I've envisioned for myself since '91. I know what I can do and I've done fairly well. But I haven't done exactly what I've wanted just because I've been held back by those leg injuries.

T&FN: *Does that mean jumping farther than both 8.95 and 30 feet?*

Powell: To break the World Record is one goal, but another main one for me is to just compete more consistently at a high level. When I don't jump over 28-feet, I feel, "Something went wrong." I know that when I'm in good health, I can jump over 28-feet in practice. So in a meet—with the crowd, the adrenaline and everything—I should jump mid-28s to 29-feet every time.

I feel that if I'm healthy and ready to compete, I'm going to be pretty tough to beat. That's the situation I'm going to put myself in. It's hard to work from a deficit standpoint, and that's what I've been doing since the '92 Olympics. I want to be able to stand on the runway and say to myself, "I'm healthy and ready to jump. Now what are you gonna do with me?"

T&FN: *But you feel you haven't been able to do that since Barcelona?*

Powell: No. I've been able to do it only periodically. Like in '94, my first meet in Modesto was the only time I did it. But I was fighting my hamstrings the rest of the season.

I want to have another year like '91, where I'm on the runway and I'm not thinking about what my limitations are because of my latest injury. All I want to be thinking about is, "How far will I go on this jump?"

I've always trained myself to deal with adversity, deal with the situation at hand. I've gotten a lot stronger mentally from jumping. I know guys last year couldn't beat me even when I was at only 80%. So what happens

But if he's not going to be out there, I'm not really thinking about him until I have to, until he's going to compete. But I wish he would.

T&FN: *You always want to meet the best.*

Powell: Definitely. The thing is, though, Carl has to do what's best for him. We all do. And jumping just a few times a year, combined with sprinting, works for him. He's stayed in the sport a long time, so that's been the most beneficial approach for him.

Powell Loves Hoops

Mike Powell loves basketball. In another lifetime, maybe hoops would be his sport of choice. For now, though, it's just a pleasant diversion from long jumping:

"I do have a dear love for basketball, but at this point in my life and the way things have gone, I wouldn't trade track for anything in the world. If I had the choice of being a pro basketball player or a pro track athlete, I'd take the track athlete anytime.

"I enjoy the advantages of track so much over basketball. You have control in track: you determine your own schedule; when, where and how you're going to compete; how you train. Everything. But in basketball, you just take what you're given.

"But I do love the game and love to be a part of it. So being in the FootLocker SlamFest every year gives me a chance to let out that aggression."

In following the game, has Powell seen any jumping talents whose abilities might translate

over to track? Or is jumping talent too sport-specific?

"I think you'll find that a lot of jumpers are former basketball players. So some players should be able to come over to track. But, just as we couldn't play basketball well now because we haven't had the chance to hone our skills, I don't think they could come into our arena and do that well either.

"I mean, Michael Jordan is an awesome physical talent. There aren't many people I can say I've looked at in total awe of their athletic ability. But Michael is one.

"The talent definitely is there in basketball. An NBA player might come to track and jump maybe 7-4 or 27-feet. But he's not going to go 7-8 or 28-feet.

"Whatever the sport, you have to have the chance to nurture your skills. Without that time, you can go only so far. I would challenge anybody in the NBA, or anywhere, to any kind of jumping contest—dunking or long jumping. I'll step over there!"

when I'm at full strength? I'm going to get that back this year—and more.

T&FN: *After last year's nationals, you said you felt Kareem Streete-Thompson was a great young talent who would be around for a long time. You once were the young newcomer too, but now you and Carl are the event's elder statesmen. How do you feel about that change in your status?*

Powell: I welcome it. I like competition. Just as I have made Carl compete better, Kareem will make me compete better—as will Roland McGhee, Erick Walder, Dion Bentley, Joe Greene.

Those guys are waiting right there, waiting for something to happen to push them to the next level. Talentwise, they are all there. I know that and it's in my mind while I'm training and competing.

T&FN: *Competition doesn't have to come just from Carl. It can come from anybody.*

Powell: Oh no. My focus shifted away from Carl probably after '92, when he decided he wouldn't compete very much. I couldn't rely on him for motivation if he was going to jump a very few times all year. I couldn't wait for him; I have to do what I have to do.

When he comes around, OK, let's do it. But he's shown he doesn't want to jump. He doesn't want to be a real long jumper and jump the whole year. He's not one of us, really. He jumps in selected meets and only when he's ready to jump.

A full season of long jumping is different.

It would be more beneficial for us as long jumpers, and the whole sport, for him to jump all the time. Everybody wants to see him compete, and compete against me—as I would. He's got his reasons for doing what he does, and I respect him for doing what he wants to do. But as a competitor and a fan of the sport, I'd like to see him compete more.

T&FN: *You will forever be known as the guy who broke Bob Beamon's fabled World Record. How has your perception changed on the effect of that single jump? How do you see it?*

Powell: I look at it as something that happened four years ago. I view every new season as being a different year, a different situation and with new goals. What I did was a "great thing." But I don't view it as what my best is.

For me, it's almost like a monkey on my back—I want to do something better. I'm defined as that jump. I did well before it and I've done well especially after it. But I'm defined by that jump, so I want to do something else.

T&FN: *It has defined a great part of your life, but what is it to you?*

Powell: It's been all positive for me. It's something that I'm really, really proud of and something I'm very happy about. But it's not a burden at all. It's a motivational tool for me. I'm proud that I've had some great years despite being injured.

But I want to have seasons where I can compete for Athlete Of The Year, period—not

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POWELL INTERVIEW — continued:

just be thought of as "guts athlete of the year." Watching the Michael Johnsons, the Morcelis, Bubkas, and Colin Jacksons, they're at that high level every competition. That's what I want.

In the long jump, there is a certain amount of competition, but I look around the track, too. I'm competing with everybody; it's a show, and me being competitive, I want to go out there and do well too.

T&FN: Being the WR holder in the long jump—having broken that record—have you ever felt expectations from people to be a certain kind of person or athlete just because you broke that particular mark?

Powell: I think that people are surprised a lot of times at the way I am. I feel more comfortable when everybody else feels comfortable. I try to keep everybody relaxed so they realize, "This is still just Mike." That makes me feel better because I don't like whatever a superstar role is. I don't want that. It's not me and I don't feel comfortable there.

As far as everyone else's expectations, I try to keep them down. I'm just doing what I'm doing. I feel happy and fortunate for that—jumping and making this kind of living. I'm very happy about that. At the same time, though—and this is my famous old line—I'm still just jumping in dirt.

T&FN: But it's the main thing you're doing right now in your life.

Powell: Yes—so I want to be the best person who jumps in dirt! I just feel really happy and really fortunate to be able to do something that I love to do.

It's not a job. You can call it a career, but I've always been a jumper. Whether it's basketball, track, or just running around the house. That's what I do—that's my job. When I started, I never thought I'd reach this level. So I'm really fortunate for that and I want to keep on doing it for as long as I can.

T&FN: Does competing at that consistently high level give you the greatest satisfaction in the event? What does?

Powell: It's the "ooooohs" from the crowd. That's what I do it for. Hopefully, I'll win with a jump that brings that reaction. Also it's the show—putting on my Walkman, dancing around, playing with the crowd. Then getting in the competition and having to come back on the last jump to win. Besides, it's just fun.

T&FN: How easy, or difficult, is it to really satisfy Mike Powell in the long jump?

Powell: I think it depends a lot on how I'm feeling at the time. If I compete the best I possibly can at that moment, then I'm happy.

T&FN: So it must be tough in those times when you're at the head of the runway all pumped up and thinking, "I want a 28 today." But your hamstrings are saying, "Mike? Hello? We're good for only 26-feet today."

Powell: Yeah, but I'm such a knucklehead, in my mind I still think I'm going to break the WR! Every time I get up there, I think, "OK, this is going to be a bomb. I don't care if I can run or not."

T&FN: Coming through in big ways has been your trademark since you made the '88 Olympic team. But especially since Tokyo, do you feel fans expect a 30-footer every single time you compete? What do you feel as expectations from the public?

Powell: I think people do expect me to challenge the record at times. I have, and I would have liked to have done it more often. But I feel the crowd mainly just wants to see a show. Personally, I like to be in a situation where if the conditions and the track are good, then I'm going to go for a record. I always want to be at that level.

T&FN: You've mentioned playing pool, and you're a big music fan. But what do you like to do off the track?

Powell: First, I just like to be aware of what's going on around me. Whether being with my friends, or playing pool or Scrabble. Even just going outside and appreciating the view of the mountains that I have from my backyard. Just being happy and enjoying anything I'm doing.

T&FN: You've always got your headset on and didn't you DJ for a time?

Powell: Oh yeah, I DJed for about eight years; a lot when I was in college. I played parties and dances and weddings. The music I played depended on the situation. For the most part, I was a hip-hop DJ. But I could easily go to a wedding, break out some Glenn Miller or whatever I needed.

T&FN: You once did some teaching. Would you ever like to do that again?

Powell: When I was finishing up my degree at UCLA, I taught at a school for kids with behavioral problems and learning disabilities. I did that for a year; it was very challenging. I'd like to get back into that when I finish track. Even back in 1988, if I hadn't made the Olympic team, I was going to teach and then jump during the summer. But things didn't work out that way—fortunately.

Still, I'd like to teach again. I love the environment, it's a great chance to influence people and I'm a people person. I love kids, it would be a great thing for me and I have a lot to give.

T&FN: Teaching is communicating, just as you communicate with a crowd when you jump.

Powell: Teaching in a classroom is very similar to what I do in clinics, in interviews, or when I go to schools to speak. Or even if I'm just out on the street and someone says, "That's Mike Powell!" I'll say, "Hey, how ya doin'?" and talk with them. Just let them know, "It's just me."

T&FN: People know you're approachable.

Powell: The way I look at it, we are blessed to do what we do. And it's not that hard to be nice to people. It's easier to be nice than it is to be mean.

Maybe you take a few minutes out of your day, or at a meet maybe half an hour, to be nice to people. But why not? That's a way of giving back directly to the sport; giving thanks for what we do.

T&FN: Is there an off-track aspect of you that might surprise fans to know about?

Powell: Hmmm, I'd say that anybody who knows me, knows what I am. I wear my heart on my sleeve and I'm pretty much an open book. You can see what kind of person I am by how I am on the track. Off the track, I'm basically the same way. I don't think there's anything that would surprise anybody. I'm not like a closet concert pianist! Pretty much, you see what you get.

I've learned from some of the best: Willie Banks, Edwin Moses, Evelyn Ashford. People like that over the years. I saw how they were with people and I realized you didn't need a public face and a private face. It's not that hard to be personable and friendly to people.

T&FN: That reflects positively on both you and the sport. For the most part, track doesn't have the big egos of other pro sports.

Powell: I think athletes get spoiled. One difference with people in track, we're not spoiled the way other athletes are. We appreciate having a big crowd. And I definitely appreciate it when someone asks for an autograph—I'm like, "Thank you for acknowledging me. I appreciate it that you recognize what I do and that I work hard at it."

In baseball and basketball and football here in the States, the athletes take it for granted. They take it as a burden, but I don't take my sport as a burden. I take it as something to be treasured.

POWELL IN A NUTSHELL

Michael Anthony Powell was born November 10, 1963, in Philadelphia, and is 6-2/170. Graduated from Edgewood High School in West Covina, California, in '81. Now represents the Foot Locker AC.

PRs(with all-time list performances in parentheses): 100—10.45 ('85); 200—20.99 ('85); HJ—7-1³/₄/2.18 ('82); LJ—29-4¹/₂/8.95 (WR) ('91); TJ—51-8/15.74 ('84).

Progression:

Year	Age	Affiliation	Long Jump	Ranks	Meets
1980	16	Calif HS Jr	21-11/6.68	—	
1981	17	Calif HS Sr	23-7/7.18	—	
1982	18	UC Irvine Fr	24-6 ¹ / ₂ /7.48	—	
1983	19	UC Irvine So	26-5 ¹ / ₂ /8.06	—	nm)NCAA
1984	20	UC Irvine Jr	26-2 ¹ / ₂ /7.98	x, 8	2)US, 6)OT
1985	21	unattached	26-9 ³ / ₄ /8.17	10, 5	3)US
1986	22	UCLA Sr	26-5/8.05	—	
1987	23	SSTC	27-7 ¹ / ₂ /8.41	6, 3	7)US
1988	24	SSTC	27-10 ¹ / ₂ /8.49	3, 3	3)OT, 2)OG
1989	25	Keiser TC	27-10 ¹ / ₂ /8.49	3, 3	2)US
1990	26	FLAC	28-5/8.66	1, 1	1)US
1991	27	FLAC	29-4 ¹ / ₂ /8.95	1, 1	2)US, 1)OF, 1)WC
1992	28	FLAC	28-4 ¹ / ₂ /8.65	2, 2	1)OT, 2)OG
1993	29	FLAC	28-6 ¹ / ₂ /8.69	1, 1	1)US, 1)WC
1994	30	FLAC	28-1 ³ / ₄ /8.58	1, 1	1)US

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