

T&FN INTERVIEW

MIKE BUNCIC

by Sieg Lindstrom

Mike Buncic was a little surprised when we called about setting up an interview. After having only had a real discus coach—Czech émigré Ladislav Pataki—since 1987, he still feels like a neophyte in the platter world.

Winner of the TAC Junior discus in 1981 while a Kentucky frosh, Buncic, 28, was born in New Jersey to Yugoslavian parents—"Slavic is a good background for the discus," he jokes—but his real athletic upbringing began when he decided in '87 to jump in his car and drive to the discus mecca of San Jose.

Training in the milieu of John Powell, Mac Wilkins, Art Burns, Ben Plucknett, et al, he made the '88 Olympic team and threw 204-11 for 10th despite having sprained his left ankle and broken a bone in his right foot playing volleyball at the U.S. training camp in Japan.

In 1989, says Buncic, he didn't train hard enough for long enough. After a strong early season, he lost to Kamy Keshmiri by six inches at TAC, a meet he has never won. That season, though, did bring Buncic's first World Ranking (No. 9) and his first U.S. No. 1.

Last year was also a disappointment for Bun-

cic. In '91, however, he has thrown a PR/world-leading 227-7 at the Fresno Relays and, under still, cool conditions, topped a Mt. SAC field that included defending No. 1 World Ranker Wolfgang Schmidt.

T&FN: What is it about discus throwing that inspires you?

Buncic: It's first of all very individual. You don't have to rely on anyone else. Physically, the sensation of doing something like that is very nice. Probably what I enjoy the most is going out to the field and just throwing it and just watching the discus sail. Not really how far it goes or any rewards you might gain from it, if you do. Just doing it itself is very enjoyable.

The discus itself is so challenging, there's always room for improvement. It's a mystery that's constantly revealing itself to you slowly, and just when you think you know all there is to know, you find something else out. That's probably true with a lot of things in life.

T&FN: Why does discus technique seem

to take so long to perfect compared to other field events?

Buncic: It's hard to really pinpoint, but I think it's such a delicate balance between your strength, and your speed, and your flexibility, and everything that comprises technique. It almost seems that it changes; there's no definite formula. And technically it's very demanding.

I'm 28, for an athlete pretty much on the older side yet in my event the majority—especially internationally—of discus throwers I compete against are older than I am. But at 28 I feel like I'm behind most athletes. I feel like I'm a beginner in some aspects. I learned even just this year so many things that it's amazing.

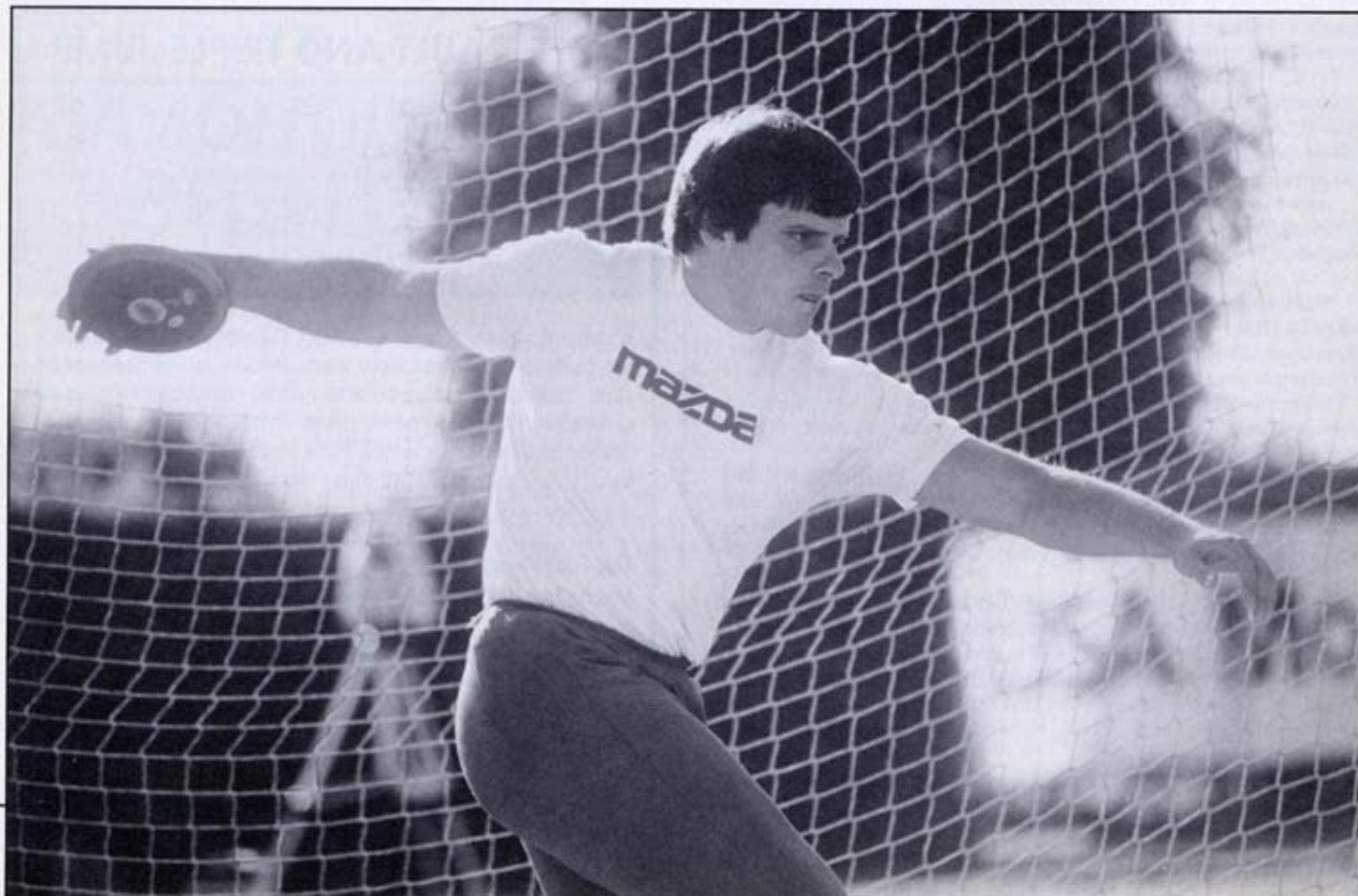
T&FN: You have a coach now who is of the "systematic" Eastern European school. Did you have any coaching in high school?

Buncic: I had some guys that were helpful, but actually I was kind of unenthused about it. I mean I did it and had fun.

T&FN: Yet you continued on with it?

Buncic: I got a college scholarship; I got offers from a few schools. Kentucky was one; I liked it the best.

I didn't go there with a mind to do anything really extraordinary but I went there and that's when I first kind of was exposed a little bit to what you should be doing, even on a basic level. And I started working at it, and I've just pro-



Victor Sailer/Agency Shot

gressed pretty steadily. I went farther than I thought I would.

T&FN: *A number of people these days are talking about possible changes in the format of track meets. Could your event be spiced up or made more comprehensible to the average fan?*

Buncic: The easiest thing is to do what the javelin did: change the implement and erase all the records. That would be the easiest way. You could set two or three World Records every year that way.

T&FN: *Do you advocate that?*

Buncic: No, I don't, but obviously you can see the influx of popularity that the javelin has taken simply because you have a reasonable possibility of going to a major meet and setting a World Record.

In the discus it is almost absolutely impossible for that to happen in a big European meet. And if you're talking about the Olympic Games or something like that, it would be as close to being impossible as it could be.

T&FN: *Major championships are always in typically "dead-air" stadiums of course. Is that what you mean?*

Buncic: The World Record is 74m [74.08/243-0] which is conceivable to throw—and I know it's possible to throw that far—but the conditions have to be so extreme, and everything has to fit together so right.

At the biggest meets, it feels like you're in some kind of controlled experiment and you're being put into the most restrictive situation you could possibly be in, and somehow you're supposed to perform out of that. You have to sit down, you can't move, it's so quiet. It's like a controlled lab experiment.

Every aspect is so tightly controlled that there's no possible deviation. And sports aren't like that. Not if they're going to be popular. You have to be able to ad lib and be natural.

T&FN: *Has that been a problem for you?*

Buncic: It makes it real difficult. And I don't think I have a real lot of problems with that, but it's no fun. It's a lot more fun to go to a meet, at Modesto or even Bruce Jenner, where there are a lot of people on the sideline yelling at you, and you're kind of walking around, doing what you want and going in and throwing. That's fun.

Even though track & field in Europe is much more popular than in the U.S., my personal belief is that track & field in the U.S. is more fun. In Europe, it's a big

business. Though the meets can be fun—especially the smaller meets—the big meets are business. You go to a good track meet in the U.S. and it's almost more of a picnic atmosphere. That's fun not only for the athletes but for the spectator.

"My personal belief is that track & field in the U.S. is more fun than in Europe."

T&FN: *You've mentioned you weren't happy with 1990. Have you made any changes this year?*

Buncic: I've trained a lot harder. I made a lot of technical experiments last year that really didn't work out. I tried to do what other people do instead of what makes me successful.

I just started late. I had the whole idea that the Goodwill Games was the big meet last year, and I wanted to start late and peak real late.

Well, I peaked late but I just wasn't in very good shape. I learned that if you want to do real well you have to train hard and for a long period of time. I hadn't really done that since 1988.

T&FN: *You thought you were over-trained the week prior to your big throw in Fresno last month?*

Buncic: I was. It's like the analogy Ladislav makes: it's like a spring, you push it down for so long, eventually it bounces back. And for me this kind of training cycle is so dramatic. For some athletes it seems to be more of an even state. Well, for me it's very dramatic ups and downs. I'm almost like the classic example.

T&FN: *Do you sometimes intentionally train hard through weeks of exhaustion in order to make the spring bounce back further?*

Buncic: Definitely. For me it's absolutely necessary.

T&FN: *Was it frustrating not being able to respond when Kamy Keshmiri go off a winner on his first throw of the '89 TAC?*

Buncic: When you lose by a couple of inches, that's tough. It just fell apart before I ever went to the TAC meet. I got sick, I lost weight, I just was not the thrower I was a month before.

The TAC meet has kind of been my curse for some reason or another. I don't know; it has some kind of jinx on me.

T&FN: *Does that bother you?*

Buncic: It used to but, to be honest with you, it bothers me almost not whatsoever now. It used to be the ultimate goal for me but now it's not. I haven't won one, which is almost unbelievable when I say it. It's just something I look past now. Which is maybe a mistake, but it's not what I want to focus on. I want to do something higher.

But the amount of bad luck I've had at TAC is incredible. And it's true you bring bad luck on yourself, but I've fouled winning throws three different times, three different years. One time I honestly didn't foul it, I don't think. Two other times I had minuscule fouls. I said, "God, once it could go my way, you'd think."

T&FN: *Do you prepare in any special way for big meets?*

Buncic: Not really. I try to make as little of a big deal out of it as I can. The more you stay in the norm you're better off. More of a big deal, you get more problems.

T&FN: *What is your biggest motivation? To beat people?*

Buncic: No. It's so far from that it's not funny. Just the constant belief that you can do better. I think my abilities are as high as anybody in the event.

I honestly think physically—and I think people who know me would probably agree—I can throw the discus as far as anyone ever has. But to actually do that is such a challenge. That's what motivates me: to achieve what I'm capable of.

It's bringing out your own abilities, which is the ultimate challenge. □

Mike Buncic was born July 25, 1962, in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, and is 6-4/245. Graduated from Fair Lawn HS in '80, and competed for Kentucky in '81 and '83-'84. Currently represents the Mazda TC. His 217-11 while at Kentucky still stands as the Collegiate Record. His recent best of 227-7 makes him the No. 8 performer in U.S. history. He has a shot PR of 64-1 ('89).

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

Year	Age	DT	Majors
'80	17/18	189-2 hs	—
'81	18/19	174-0	1)TAC Jr
'82	19/20	192-10	—
'83	20/21	195-9	—
'84	21/22	212-5	3)NC, nq)TAC
'85	22/23	217-11 (x, 4)	3)NC, 7)TAC, 1)OF
'86	23/24	213-7 (x, 4)	3)TAC
'87	24/25	226-4 (x, 4)	5)TAC, 2)OF
'88	25/26	226-1 (x, 2)	3)TAC, 2)OT, 10)OG
'89	26/27	226-0 (9, 1)	2)TAC
'90	27/28	222-2 (x, 2)	2)TAC
'91	28/29	227-7	—