

Nick Symmonds

In the waters of the 800, Nick Symmonds, who counts fishing among his passions, has for the past decade swum—no, make that run—like a shark.

He has always moved forward, setting PRs every year '03–12 except for '04, his soph season at Willamette, where he won 4 straight Div. III titles in the 2-lapper and 3 in the 1500.

After moving on to the Nike Oregon Track Club in June '07, taking 2nd in his first USATF appearance, then winning each year 2008–12, this year at age 29 the Idaho native checked off another goal, racing to silver—his first global medal—at the World Championships.

An athlete who hopes to leave the elite-level sport better than he found it, Symmonds has spoken out, leveraging social media to get his message across, in favor of increasing athletes' freedom to "build their brands," particularly through the easing of advertising space restrictions on uniforms and, famously, their shoulders.

After his podium run in Moscow, Symmonds advocated publicly for gay and lesbian rights, condemning host nation Russia's anti-gay laws and likening the U.S. conversation around gay marriage to "talking about whether people should be allowed to own other people as slaves."

Symmonds speaks his mind. T&FN reached him in the Los Angeles area for this chat at the tail-end of his fall break. Discussion topics ranged far and wide:

T&FN: How goes it this autumn?

Symmonds: I'm doing good. I'm down here in Santa Monica, hanging out with my sister and doing some training. My sister moved down here 6 months ago and I just like it down here for the weather. I'm finishing up the last week of my downtime, just doing some easy mileage. Then on the 1st [of November] I fly back to Oregon to really ramp up my training for the indoor season.

T&FN: Is the LA weather the primary draw for a guy who lives in rainy Oregon?

Symmonds: Yeah, I like it for the weather. I like it for the food; there's so much diversity here. I work with a publicist based in Beverly Hills and he and I are working on some projects to kind of continue the campaign, which is to

make my brand more well known outside of track circles and to continue to give great exposure to my sponsors outside of track & field meetings.

T&FN: Can you talk about any of these projects?

Symmonds: Yeah. I've been blogging with *Runner's World* for a while now and I've been getting great feedback on that. Everybody keeps asking when I'm going to come out with a book and I think it's about time I sit down and write one.

If I can find the time this November/December, I think I have a publisher who's shown some interest. I'm kind of just shopping the idea around and seeing how much interest there is.

T&FN: What would you write about?

Symmonds: It would be part travel diary, part behind-the-scenes looks at what it's like to be a professional track & field runner. I think too many times these books come out and they're more like training diaries or dry autobiographies.

I don't necessarily want to tell my whole autobiography. I'd like to tell a couple great stories about selling my shoulder on eBay or going on a date with Paris Hilton or what life's like in an Olympic Village.

I want it to be more travel-based than just training-based. I think the general public would appreciate it more. That's always been

my thing; it's easy to relate to the die-hard track fans but how do we get the non-track fans to find our athletes or our sport interesting?

T&FN: You've boldly spoken out for athletes' rights and have called for relaxation of sponsor logo rules. Do you feel you've made progress?

Symmonds: I think we've absolutely made progress. The first thing I'd point to is that USATF doesn't enforce their uniform guidelines anymore. That was a major battle that we won and now at USATF-governed meets you can run around like a NASCAR, provided it doesn't violate your clauses with your shoe sponsor.

I'm currently renegotiating my

Symmonds In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Nicholas Symmonds was born December 30, 1983, in Sun Valley, Idaho; 5-10/161 (1.78/73)

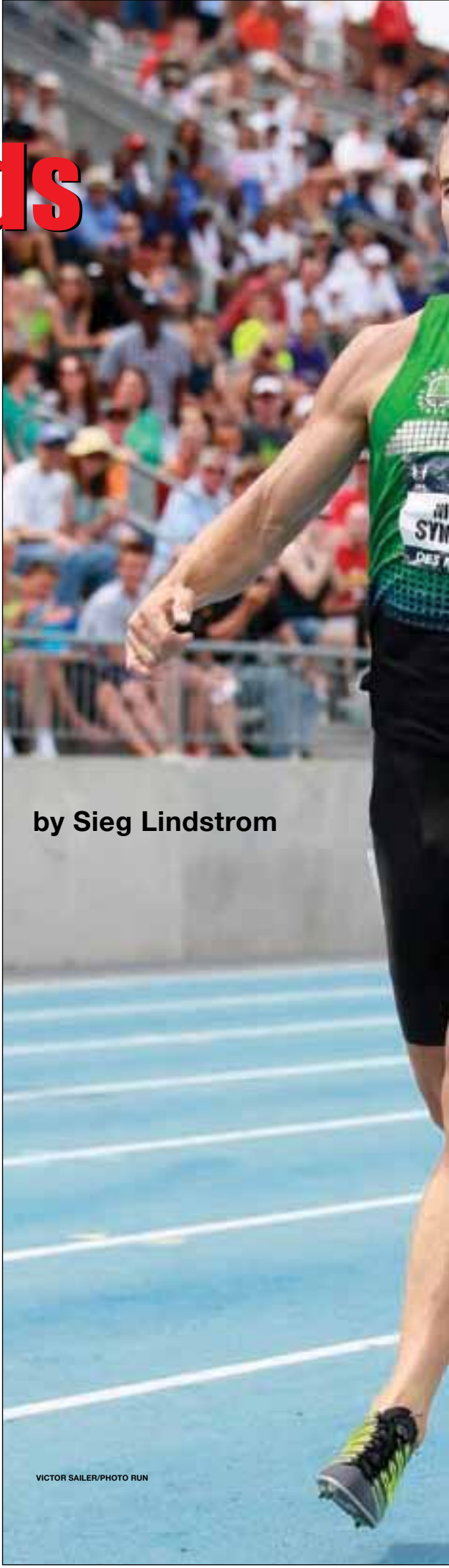
•**Schools:** Bishop Kelly HS (Boise, Idaho) '02; Willamette ('06); now represents Nike Oregon TC Elite

•**Coaches:** Mike Shanahan (HS), Matt McGuirk (college), Frank Gagliano (pro), Mark Rowland (pro)

•**PRs:** 600—1:14.47 ('08) (7, 8 A); 800—1:42.95 ('12) (3, 5 A); 1000—2:16.35 ('10) (5, 6 A); 1500—3:34.55 ('13); Mile—3:56.72i ('07)

•**Major Meets:** 800—2)US '06; 1)USi, 2)US, 6sf)WC '07; 2)USi, 6)WIC, 1)OT, 5sf)OG '08; 1)US, 6)WC '09; 1)USi, dq)WIC, 1)US '10; 1)US, 5)WC '11; 1)OT, 5)OG '12; 2)US, 2)WC '13

•**World/US Rankings:** 800—x/7 '06; x/2 '07; x/1 '08; 10/1 '09; 6/1 '10; 6/1 '11; 8/1 '12; ?/1? '13



by Sieg Lindstrom



“In this sport you’re either a medalist or you’re some guy no one’s ever heard of. It’s absolutely shocking, the difference in the way that you’re treated with a medal and without a medal.”

contract with my shoe sponsor and we’ll definitely see what kind of leeway I have there. If I can, I’m going to rock a dozen logos during indoor season.

That and inspiring younger kids to try to do something different and work a little harder on their social media.

Jordan McNamara’s a teammate of mine and I think if you follow him on Twitter or Instagram, you see how hard he works to really connect with his followers. I’ve seen a lot of young athletes do that. They really appreciate that they are running their own business.

That’s one of the things that I try to tell kids when they come out of school. Some of them like the idea that they’re working for the shoe company or they’re working for their agent, and I try to explain to them that they’re independent contractors, working for themselves and running their own business.

Even though that can be kind of a daunting idea coming out of college, it provides you so much more freedom to create the brand that you want to be and shop that brand around to sponsors and ultimately make a fair living in this sport, which can be tough.

T&FN: Historically, not too many athletes have pushed the boundaries on that. It seems our sport has the few superstars who’re doing great financially so don’t rock the boat, and almost everyone else is scratching to get by so feel they can’t afford to risk shaking things up.

Symmonds: There’s a huge curve in the payscale. If you’re ranked No. 1 in the U.S. in a popular event or ranked top 5 in the world, you’re going to make good money. If you’re ranked 10 in the U.S. you’re barely making ends meet; if anything, you’re paying to do this job.

As a kid coming from a Div. III background, I really had to work my butt off for everything I got—I had to buy my own warmups in college—I know how hard this is and I know how hard we work.

Even though I’ve worked for 7 years now to make a great living and am fortunate to have a solid income, I haven’t forgotten where I came from or that first contract when I came out of college when I was trying to live paycheck to paycheck.

I just think of all these kids coming out of school who are entering into an economy and

a marketplace that’s even worse than when I came out.

I graduated with a 1:45.83 PR and was fortunate to get a contract with Nike, but if you’re coming out now as a 1:45.83 kid you’re lucky if anyone even knows your name nowadays, with the way the U.S. is so deep.

I think if we’re going to continue to develop America’s talent and if America wants to tune in every 4 years and watch Team USA rack up the medals, we need to support our Olympians.

I think part of that is USATF chipping in a little bit more, part of it is the shoe companies coming in a little bit more. But I never wanted it to be a sport of handouts. I want it to be a sport of young entrepreneurs who market their own brands.

That’s why I was so adamant about opening up these logo restrictions: so that a kid coming out of Des Moines, Iowa, can go to the local Mom & Pop shops and the local businesses and say, “Hey, I’m going to be able to give you a return on your investment this way, by advertising your company here and here.”

Previously, we weren’t able to do that because the governing bodies had completely confiscated our advertising space, and the IAAF is still doing that.

T&FN: Do you feel you’ve run up against a wall with the IAAF?

Symmonds: I think they announced they were going to open up a few more square inches on the jersey for a club logo or an additional sponsor—although that doesn’t do me much good because I represent Nike and the OTC.

I’ve always said the IAAF has to earn an income, they have to have an operating budget. I’m not against the IAAF doing that but they sell millions and millions of dollars in advertising space during their events. I don’t think it’s really going to hurt them or their relationship with their sponsors if they give the athletes another couple square inches on their shoulders, for example. That’s very, very valuable advertising space right now that’s being completely wasted.

Everybody needs a piece of the pie. I just think the athletes are getting too small a piece right now—and without athletes we don’t have a sport.

T&FN: You took the silver medal in Moscow. Has that helped your bottom line much?

Symmonds: Incredibly so. In this sport you’re either a medalist or you’re some guy no one’s ever heard of. It’s absolutely shocking, the difference in the way that you’re treated with a medal and without a medal.

As a guy who always knocked on the door there for 6 years, always 5th or 6th, I can speak to it more so maybe than anybody else. Now that I have the medal I’m in the club, I get the private room when I travel to meets. I get the appearance fees and I get the bigger contracts.

I’m appreciative of it but at the same time I wish that the guys who are finishing 5th, 6th, 7th in the world would be getting taken care of a little bit better—and if they’re not getting taken care of better that at least the hustlers can get out there and make it happen for themselves.

T&FN: Was the last month of your ‘13 season,

after the Worlds, a different ballgame?

Symmonds: Very significantly so. I don't know that I'd ever made an appearance fee going to a Diamond League in 7 years of doing this, and I made an appearance fee at every single race I ran after Moscow. It's a little bit alarming how much this is all about who has a medal and who doesn't.

Just because you're a medalist doesn't mean you're filling seats but for some reason you get paid if you have a medal around your neck.

I've always been kind of shocked that there are athletes who do so much to promote a meet, do so much interacting with kids and making sure the people in the seats are having a good time, and they get paid nothing while another guy who blows off the fans and comes and does a shitty job at his race, he gets paid a 5-figure appearance fee.

That's never really added up to me, but I'm also not a meet director so I don't know how the bottom line works for these things.

I'll just say I've seen it both ways now and if you're in this sport and you want to make money, you'd better figure out how you're going to get that medal because it's a crazy payscale.

T&FN: About racing to that medal—In Daegu at the 400 you split 51.7 with three guys clearly ahead of you. London, of course, was a World Record race. You were 8th at the bell in 50.5. This time you were in the lead, essentially even with Duane Solomon at halfway. Did you simply vow to race differently after that Olympic race?

Symmonds: London was tough to swallow because I did almost PR by a full second, became the third-fastest American ever and still failed to medal, which just didn't add up.

But I'd seen patterns before where after an Olympic year people got injured or took kind

of a down cycle because the intensity of an Olympic year is oftentimes so high that people can't recover.

That's never been an issue for me so I thought, "OK, if I can just get back to that kind of shape, 1:42.9 wins a medal at every

into it but 9 times out of 10 you're going to have to make adjustments once it starts going.

Typically in a championship setting the only thing I'm concerned with is being on the outside shoulder of the leader with 100 meters to go because if I can do that I almost always

Symmonds emphatically reclaimed top-American status from Solomon



single Olympics and every single World Championships except London. I don't have to necessarily become a 1:41 guy; I just have to be the guy who can run 1:43-low, 1:42-high, when it counts."

So coach Rowland and I looked at the season as, "We're not trying to change the world; we're just trying to be consistent." And if you average out my top 5 times this year versus my top 5 times from last year, you'll notice I broke 1:44 five times this year and the times averaged out to be 1:43-mid. That's what I wanted to be. I wanted to be the guy that could run great every time that he steps on the track, but most importantly in the World final.

Everybody is kind of chuckling that I completely changed my race strategy but I'm actually using the exact same race strategy that I've used for the last 5-6 years, which is run a 2-second differential.

So in the Olympic Games I went 50.5/52.5, and that was a 2-second differential; it just put me at the very back of the pack. This year I went out in 50.3 at the World Championships and it put me in the front. I've never been a guy who's too concerned about where I'm at in the pack. It's more what my body can physiologically handle, and that's a 2-second differential.

T&FN: So you did not revise your race plan?

Symmonds: You know, it's the 800. You can always have a race plan going

find a way to get to the line first. But in this championship I knew it was going to go out hard because I knew there were several players that wanted to be in the front at 200. I didn't expect it to go out as hard as it did [Solomon 23.59] but once it did and then slowed down so abruptly, I again was just running my own race, 50-point and 52-point, and I knew that would add up to a medal.

These guys went 23-point/26-point. I've never understood why someone would want to do that; physiologically it's very difficult to do. So when all those guys pumped the brakes at 250 I just maintained my momentum and worked my way up to the front.

That actually was a move that Borzakovski kind of perfected, and if you watch him back in Daegu he pulled the same move. It's netted him several medals.

I had the same idea. I just wanted to be on the outside shoulder of the leader no matter who it was with 100 to go—without expending too much energy to get there.

T&FN: Well, congratulations. I know you would have liked to get the win but you have more seasons in front of you.

Symmonds: Yeah. You know, I think I ran for the win. When I flipped the switch with 100 to go I put a yard or two on the competitors but Aman and he ended up running the fastest time of the year. I ran the second-fastest.

So I think if you look at the season as a whole, it really worked out the way it was supposed to. He was clearly the best and I was clearly No. 2. That's satisfying and I can take some comfort in that. □

A Move To The 1500?

Nick Symmonds' first big goal in '14 is to win the World Indoor title. Then there will be a change of pace:

"I'd like to really, really gain strength and come back to run the 1500 at USAs. Because it's a down year with no World or Olympic team to make, at USAs this year I think I'd like to do something different and run the 1500..."

[In 2013] "I ended up with a PR, 3:34, and had the win at Occidental. People forget that I do have three national titles in the 1500 from [Div. III] college days.

"I do know how to run it tactically, but at this level you can train for the 8 or you can train for the 15. But they're so different, I don't think you can really train to do them both well.

"So I'll focus on the 15 in the early part of my outdoor season and then once I've run USAs, I'll switch gears and focus exclusively on the 8 over in Europe."