

# TERRY ALBRITTON

## T&FN Interview

by Tom Jordan

**S**uperstar. Sports-Radical. Philosopher-King. The human inclination to apply labels is a process Terry Albritton has become well acquainted with since he first gained notoriety as a 16-year-old football player and shot putter at Newport Harbor HS in Newport Beach, Calif. An all-around athlete, Terry used his 6-4/257 bulk to win All-American football honors and set world age-group records. Label him superstar.

Recruitment by 150 colleges and 13 recruiting trips exposed him to the "meat market of college athletics." A year of academics at Stanford later, Albritton decided to "symbolically withdraw from the energy of the collegiate scene." Competing unattached, he set the world Junior record of 69- $\frac{3}{4}$  in 1974, and two years later, after a transfer to Hawaii, a world record (71-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ ).

But then a new Athletic Director determined that there was no interest, let alone money, for a track program at Hawaii, and dropped the sport. Enraged, partially by the "no interest" rationale ("How can they say that when we were getting no publicity and still had 8000 people watch the Hawaii-PCC dual?") Terry organized boycotts and lined up political support to get the program reinstated. Many political machinations later, Terry was still an athlete without a program, but with a new determination to see the priorities of the sports world change.

Now back at Stanford, he is a senior in Communications with a special interest in film-making. Partly because of his political experiences, and his curriculum, the 22-year-old Albritton describes himself as "media conscious," and invests the press and television with the power to shape attitudes. Partly it is this which attracts him to film, and partly it is an open yet reflective nature which cannot in good conscience talk of the top of a pyramid without describing all of the blocks which have been placed before.

Filling the 12 x 12 space of the housekeeping-hotel room which has become his temporary home, Albritton lit the first of several cigarettes, and punctuated his life-story with many incredibly resonant, self-deprecating baritone chuckles. The last label seemed best.

**T&FN:** How did you get started in shot putting?

**Albritton:** Well, at my junior high school, they'd leave out the track equipment during the recreation breaks and we'd play around with it. I really wanted to be a pole vaulter. Steel poles. I was vaulting on the wet grass one day, went up and the bottom of the pole slipped out and I landed on the back of my head and knocked me out—that's when I gave that up.

• PHOTO BY DON CHADEZ

We also used to pick up these shots—there were a lot of gophers around and we couldn't get close enough to them to catch them by hand—so we'd throw the shot a lot. It was sort of the hunter-gatherer mentality. I still believe that: that the shot put was invented by a bunch of guys who had the hunter-gatherer mentality.

**T&FN:** Was your talent obvious from the beginning?

**Albritton:** I was a closet shot putter when I was in junior high school. I was just a middle-of-the-road type guy. The best I ever did was 6th place my 8th grade year with the 8-lb shot—put it about 31 feet.

That summer, my sister brought home a shot, and I'd go out and throw it just for the hell of it. I kind of developed a little snap, sort of a primitive reverse. But I played football my freshman year and forgot about the shot until we had a decathlon in a winter conditioning program and I threw the shot 6-7 feet farther than anybody, including the seniors. The track coach heard about it and used the right reinforcement—rubbed me the wrong way, or something like that, saying I couldn't do it, so I went out in the first track meet and using a prehistoric form, won the meet.

I had a helluva good time. Right off the bat, the difference between the atmosphere in football and track was so evident. I had such a much better time, and I started to develop a love for the sport. I just blossomed from there, and physically grew from 6-1 to 6-4 my junior year.

**T&FN:** Does bigness run in your family?

**Albritton:** No, my Dad's 5-10 and 185; my Mom is pretty tall—5-9.

**T&FN:** What did they feed you that you ended up 6-4 $\frac{1}{2}$ /257?

**Albritton:** Gee, I don't know... I used to drink a lot of milk [laughs]. That sounds like a commercial—Just send your money to Box... But no, I really didn't eat too much as a kid. Had about one or two meals, usually at night, but I can remember just drinking a helluva lot of milk. We lived

on the beach; it was always warm down there, and I was always active.

In fact, early in my life, I was just in the water eight hours a day. I really got into aquatic sports. I might have been a competitive swimmer if I'd been introduced to a program then, because I could beat all of my friends in swimming races.

**T&FN:** With your early success in the shot, how were you able to keep your perspective?

**Albritton:** You have to consider that I received a lot of publicity very early. I was 16 years old and a high school All-American, and had my picture on the cover of *Letterman* magazine; a lot written about me at an early age. And I saw the duality of what they wrote and how I really was—they didn't coincide! They tried to market me as the All-American boy, and I just wasn't that.

**T&FN:** I gather that competitiveness is a part of your nature, though?

**Albritton:** Oh, no, at least not in the way everybody looks at it, like the "only thing is winning" mentality. I like to compete for the good time. It's like playing pin-ball. While you're doing it you're going "Oh wow!" Your senses are alive and you're going for it. But you can only thrive on something so long, and life is a lot larger than just winning.

**T&FN:** I noticed you didn't look too upset with your fourth-place at San Diego [65-6 $\frac{1}{4}$ ].

**Albritton:** [laughs] Well, there are so many damn cycles. You never really know what's going to happen. Hey, it felt like I was throwing 75-0, but they were just falling short! While my 70-footers earlier in the year didn't feel all that special.

The whole technique in the shot put is less than a second, and you really have to coordinate a lot of stuff in that short a time period. In fact, because of the 7-foot circle and because it takes less than a second, I really think it is the most explosive event known to man. I've really had an "out of the body" feeling after a big throw. It's like all the energy leaves with the shot, and you are kind of like a shell, watching it go over.

**T&FN:** Do you think that going to Hawaii, with its slim chances for major competitions, hurt your career?

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**Albritton:** No, just the opposite. I think it was a major reason that kept me in the sport. I was feeling at 18 that I was just burning out. I was seriously considering giving up the whole thing. Getting to Hawaii, and the low-key profile, enabled me to do what was really important to me, which was training.

**T&FN:** *Your world record over there, you knew it was coming?*

**Albritton:** Yeah. That whole '75-'76 year was amazing. The year before the Olympics and I was psyched to do it. The Pan-Am Games were in October. In late September, I hurt my back; crushed my L3 vertebrae. And in early October I fell off my motorcycle at 45 mph and really sprained my ankle; I couldn't even walk. So I went down to Mexico City and with a cast on my leg, I put one throw, and that led the competition until the last round! I ended up finishing third.

I said, "Something's got to happen this year" when I got back to Hawaii, and sure enough my putting began to come around. I'd go out and throw 68, 69, 70 footers every day.

Right after the world record, I got sick, pulled a hamstring, but then I started to come back. In fact, I threw two feet beyond the world record in practice. Two days later my shoulder blew.

I pulled the pectoralis minor, which kind of holds your bicep in place, and it rolled up into my chest. I was doing a 525-lb reverse bench press and I had the bar up too high and lost it and this bar was coming straight down at me and I thought, "Oh shit, this bar is going to decapitate me." And just before it hit, this muscle snapped. They hurt about the same amount. I thought I'd had a heart attack. I looked in the mirror and there was this three-inch knot in my chest. I looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger—I would have won the Mr. Best Breast of the night! I was black and blue all the way to the knuckles of my left hand. It happened about May 10th. Naturally, it forced me out of the NCAA.

**T&FN:** *Did you have it operated on?*

**Albritton:** No, it's still there [flexes right arm and shoulder and the scar tissue shows through the skin]. I still can't do any bench presses. I rested it all summer, and could only bench press 135-lbs, and that hurt! I thought it was the end of my career. But I've learned to train around it.

**T&FN:** *That basically ruined your hopes for the Olympics though?*

**Albritton:** Well, I tell you, I cried that night. Especially doing this two days after throwing two feet past the world record. I just tasted that gold. It hurt a lot. But situations like that make you more human. You realize, "Hey, I'm no god, I'm just a human being." So I think it gave me an initiative to look for other things in track and field than just the gold medal. Try to look at the values beyond just that winning syndrome.

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**T&FN:** *But you almost made the team anyway!*

**Albritton:** It was kind of amazing. Every day I threw with my left arm strapped to my side, and got up to 52-53 feet. I left for LA for the AAU and popped one out 69-6. I just went, "Whoa, what is this!" That was the ultimate "I can't believe it." When the media came to talk to me, I said, "I'm going to throw somewhere between 50 and 80 feet at the Trials," and everybody thought it was pretty funny, but I was serious.

**T&FN:** *After taking fourth in the Trials, how do you feel about the selection system for picking the team?*

**Albritton:** I don't think it is the American system which is wrong, because there is a three-man limit per event, and they have to do it some way. It's pretty objective, so I'm not really bitter against that system—I'm bitter against the Olympic system, which says each country can only have three performers. I think the top 30 athletes should all be there in the Olympics, regardless of whether they're Russians, East Germans, or all Americans.

**T&FN:** *Are the Olympics still the most important track meet to you?*

**Albritton:** I realize it's not pure and perfect. That it's a money-making program for television which will turn over a lot of dollars. I'd like to see the Games get back to the athletes. I'm not an entertainer, I'm a scientist.

**T&FN:** *You'll be graduating at the end of this season, what then?*

**Albritton:** My goals are to develop the skill I'm working on now—film-making. I'm completing a documentary on Al Feuerbach. I realize now the importance of the media, and how they are a major aspect in determining if something is going to sell. I want to have impact on people and see things change. See the values change so people aren't as geared to these spectator orgies and are more oriented toward participation.

My long-range goal is to get a sports revolution going. The athletes have to realize that it's not going to change from the top down.

I'd like to charter a United States track team, where we get some of the top athletes in this country, pick a target area, write the corporations around it and get them to contribute money for clinics, where we'll try and get a group of top athletes together and get the kids turned on to athletics. This is just one idea, and I hope to get this one started this summer. There will be others.

I think it's time to face up to the situation and say, "Hey, let's get this sport together." It's going to fold if it continues the way it is.

We are all at the cross roads.

**T&FN:** *What do you do when you're not training or studying? Do you really play pin-ball?*

**Albritton:** Hey, pin-ball is amazing. Playing pin-ball is reflective of how well

I'm going to do in shot putting. I'm not kidding. When I'm playing good pinball, I'm going to throw well. I use it as a psychological steering mechanism.

**T&FN:** *What else do you do?*

**Albritton:** Right now, I'm kind of lonely. Just because I'm back over here—it's kind of a culture shock. And I left a lot of friends in Hawaii. I like to spend as much time as I can with the opposite sex. I do a lot of things most people do, I guess.

I look forward to the social get-togethers after the meets just as much as the meet. That's what's really keeping me in the sport—being with the other shot putters. I feel pretty close to all these guys.

**T&FN:** *How about the talent of people in your event, like the ones at San Diego?*

**Albritton:** I think all of those guys have enormous talent. Shmock can explode one any day. Feuerbach: he's probably got the greatest concentration of talents combined of anyone who ever lived. Wilkins: just a phenomenal athlete, period.

**T&FN:** *How about Terry Albritton?*

**Albritton:** (laughs) Well, I'm young; I'm coming up. These weight events, man, you have to culture it and nurse it a long time. The media expects too much, too early. I've tried to keep a level perspective; know how far I want to take it, that today isn't everything, and that I'm building towards an "ultimate" throw, something where I'm really physically ready.

**T&FN:** *It seems like the level of shot putting has gone down in the past couple of years. How come?*

**Albritton:** Well, you know, Feuerbach and Woods, they spoiled the world, throwing those 69 and 70 footers every week. Oldfield hurt it even worse, throwing 75-0, and then his credibility was kind of lost, one way and another, and Feuerbach and Woods, they kind of had their ups and downs. We're more back to reality now.

**T&FN:** *Do you believe Oldfield's 75-0?*

**Albritton:** I did right after he threw it. But since then, I've heard some stories and rumors, and sometimes I think 75 is just an impossible throw. But Brian is an amazing athlete. I would like nothing better than for him to get his amateur standing back so we could all go against each other.

**T&FN:** *You say 75 feet seems impossible, do you mean that?*

**Albritton:** Well, no. I think it is within my reach someday.

**T&FN:** *What are your goals for this season?*

**Albritton:** Well, I plan to train like a wildman for the next month, and then go for the world record in a meet we're having on March 19th, the Stanford Inv.

**T&FN:** *You're calling the home run then?*

**Albritton:** Yeah, I am. Course I did that for the San Diego meet, and got these big writeups and finished fourth. But if I progress normally, it should come. □

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