

TOM JENNINGS

by Garry Hill

You may not know him, but you know his work. He says of his molding of Dwight Stones, "I took a pimply-faced introvert and turned him into a raving egomaniac." Seven of the country's all-time top 10 in the shot have worn his club's jersey.

He's Tom Jennings, coach of the Pacific Coast Club and general track entrepreneur.

His detractors put him down as a con-man. Some call him a racist. Chances are they have seen the inner workings of his club and are having a bad attack of sour grapes.

For the world-class athlete who wants a laid-back lifestyle and a chance to see the best parts of the world, the PCC can't be beat.

It should also be noted the PCC is open to both sexes, an option not found on the nation's other leading clubs.

Jennings himself has retired from his business as a high-pressured insurance executive and devotes most of his time to working on deals for his track squad and on his postage stamp brokering.

Forsaking his roots as a Californian, he has opted for the bucolic lifestyle of the country gentleman, running the affairs of his widely-spread charges from his new house in the unlikely setting of West Lebanon, N.H. From that retreat emanate the machinations that keep some of the country's best talent a smooth-running operation.

Certainly no other human being can lay claim to having seen as many top-flight track meets as Jennings. He has seen more World Records in the last 5 years than most people see in

a lifetime. This is one of the best parts of his job: getting to do what he likes best. Because at heart he is a track nut; one of those rare people who knows the names of all the competitors, and the marks that go with them.

A mediocre half-miler in the early '60s (PR 1:52.4), Jennings says he must hold a "World Record" of sorts. In his attempts to break 2:00 for the first time, he once ran 7 meets in a row in the 2:00 to 2:01 range.

"I was too slow to make the Striders' 2M relay, so I started the 49er TC," he relates. That was in 1965, at age 24.

Actually, the team was first known as the Long Beach State Alumni Club, but that was a bit restrictive.

With his 49er group, he entered into an unfortunate liaison with a figure named Mel Zahn. That spelled the eventual end of that organization, but out of the ashes came the Pacific Coast Club:

T&FN: How did the 49ers become the PCC?

Jennings: In June of 1967 the 49er TC went belly up because of unpaid airline tickets. Let's just say that I lost control of the situation and I ended up picking up the tab. So in September we reformed as the Pacific Coast Club, which became a

non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. The Pacific Coast Club was a large men's social club, 7 stories, in Long Beach. It went belly up in 1971, but we stayed.

The guy who helped set us up in 1967 was very astute—I guess he suspected they would go bankrupt someday, so we were always set up as a separate corporation.

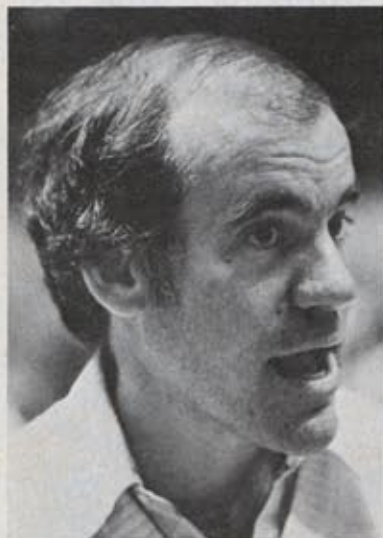
T&FN: Are other clubs set up this way? Or should they be?

Jennings: I believe that a few of them are, and that many pretend they are. The Tobias Striders are, and have been for some time.

Usually the clubs are just something that someone starts up and the difficulty with that is that if you have a leader like we did in 1966, who doesn't have a very good idea of money management, each individual athlete becomes responsible for the entire amount of the bill if you're not corporate. That's what happened in 1967, but it can't happen now. If I bungle everything up, they can't go after Ripley's teaching salary to get the money.

T&FN: They could do that?

Jennings: They actually did it in 1967. Bob Redington, a miler with our team, was working for Aetna Life Insurance in Los Angeles and his money was attached to pay a bill incurred by Mel



photos by Paul Sutton/Duomo



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"You can save 60-70% of your overall travel cost and travel time."

"I may be more of a coach than some who masquerade as coaches."

Zahn with Continental Airlines.

We were saved from the Continental Airlines debit because one of the people named in that suit was O.J. Simpson, who was a registered member of the 49er Track Club and they didn't want to take O.J. to court.

T&FN: *I don't remember him running for you.*

Jennings: He never did run, but he was signed up. He broke his arm, or something.

T&FN: *Most people today probably don't realize that just a few years ago you had such a big, well-rounded team, capable of winning in every event at almost any level of competition.*

Jennings: We once had dual meets on consecutive weekends against California, Arizona State, San Jose State and Indiana. We had a full-blooming schedule, and we won virtually all of our meets. We were quite good and that was fun, but it was virtually impossible to finance.

T&FN: *When did you change the club's orientation to a small, elite group of specialists?*

Jennings: Starting in 1971 I got interested in having milers on the team. I was a distance runner myself, but I became interested in milers primarily because I started to love indoor track meets and if the old coach was going to go around and see indoor track meets he had to have some athletes that people also wanted to see at track meets. I sort of ended up with all the milers. At that time I realized that if you have a product in this business you can have a very enjoyable time and get around at a very nice level.

T&FN: *How does one get to be a member of the Pacific Coast Club?*

Jennings: The last person that I recruited was in 1971. At that time we were recruiting because of what the other clubs were doing. Trying to get people jobs. If they had the flu you had to find them a doctor. I had a family myself and I said that it didn't make a lot of sense to be taking their parents' place.

That's when I decided that I wanted to provide competition, and that's it. And to enjoy getting to and from competitions. So I said, "If I recruit, I'm obligated; if I don't recruit, I'm not obligated." I've used that approach ever since.

People on our team go out to others and say, "Hey, we know that if you'd ask Tom to be on the team that he'd take you." But I myself don't make a commitment.

T&FN: *So people have to ask. What kind of standards do you have? In an athletic sense.*

Jennings: Normally I would say that I would not be interested in anyone unless they were in the top 10 in the world, or else, for some reason like being a very good friend of someone on the team and having very good potential.

T&FN: *But you also apply personality Bible of the Sport*

criteria.

Jennings: They have to be more than good. We travel so much together. About 7 months of the year, and any group of people that is as close as we have to be during that period of time—you have to select people who will potentially get along well with each other.

We've had many people whose tenure with the Pacific Coast Club has lasted longer than their marriages. Also people who have been with the team many years and still get along with each other very well. That's my goal: to have no infighting. That's what kills track teams.

T&FN: *What happens if you get upset and want to terminate someone? Or if the rest of the team gets disenchanting with someone and wants their contract terminated?*

Jennings: I think it's well known that the team is run as a dictatorship. If I don't like someone, I try to be fair. I've been an employer in the business world in the past and I'm used to being the boss. I'm not as tough as some people make me out.

I usually try to carry someone at least one year if their results aren't good. If I plain just don't like them, I encourage them to leave. Usually by telling them that I don't want to arrange any more competitions for them. That hasn't happened very often. John Powell was one; he stayed on the team for about 6 months longer than I wanted him to.

T&FN: *One of the big assets of belonging to the PCC, as you alluded to earlier, is being on the road a lot, getting to see a lot of the world, to go to a lot of exotic places. Such as your tour in 1976 for a dual meet against Hawaii with a partial team. Is that a big plus?*

Jennings: It's nice. I like to travel and I can't travel unless the team travels. We've done a lot of "first" things. We were the first track team to go to East Germany. We were the first team to go to Tahiti for a competition. We were the first team to go into Czechoslovakia after the revolution. A lot of things like that are so interesting but are completely overlooked.

People usually just think of us as 3 indoor meets in a weekend. We go lots of places. The athletes have a choice in it—they aren't forced to go anywhere. But we go virtually everywhere. And when we go, we're respected in the manner we travel. We don't go by bus.

T&FN: *Don't you also have a deal with Club Med?*

Jennings: Yes, it's a chain of about 80 French-based, sports-oriented resorts. In 1974 I went on a personal vacation at Thanksgiving with my wife to Tahiti. It was such a nice place that I thought it would be great to unwind there after a tough indoor season.

It doesn't really cost that much to go there from Los Angeles with excursion fares. I said that our top 5 indoor athletes would get a week free in Tahiti and they

could stay another week on their own money if they wanted. That was \$200 extra.

The Club Med people saw Stones, who had previously set a World Record. The French are very track conscious and they thought up the idea that it would be great if Dwight could give a demonstration, jumping on the volleyball court. It was extremely popular.

The personnel move all over the world and pretty soon we knew someone all over the world who knew how nice the demonstration was. That was 5 years ago. In essence, now we can go anywhere in the world and stay for free room and board in exchange for demonstrations that we give to the guests of the different clubs.

T&FN: *How is this legal by IAAF rules?*

Jennings: All we're receiving is room and board. We're just staying for a pure demonstration—it's in no way a clinic or a competition. There's no pay involved.

T&FN: *You're also an acknowledged genius at understanding airline fares. Also knowing which money to change in which countries at which time. You obviously minimize travel costs.*

Jennings: Knowing airlines, the way that European and domestic ticketing works, you can save probably 60-70% of your overall travel cost and travel time. By scheduling competition in the right order so you don't backtrack. By knowing where you are going a month or 3 months in advance your expenses can drop tremendously.

We were in Europe last summer on a full-coach rate, which allows "unlimited" stopovers. Other people were getting a roundtrip ticket for less money than our ticket costs 1-way. But theirs only went to one point, so by the time they had finished buying additional tickets on top of their roundtrip, ours was so much cheaper there was no comparison.

T&FN: *How do you react when someone brings up your "lilywhite" club?*

Jennings: That's very interesting, because we haven't been very lilywhite. When we started we were a predominantly black team. As late as 1976 and 1977 Mike Boit and Andrea Lynch were on the Pacific Coast Club.

The problem we have is with the non-recruiting method I use. Other teams, predominantly black, are very active in recruiting. They recruit by race; I don't do that.

When a black now does apply it is difficult on him. The administration of "black clubs" tends to try and keep them away because we are a "white club." It then becomes the decision of the athlete.

T&FN: *Do they get outside pressure not to join?*

Jennings: Yes, and outside pressure to quit the team.

T&FN: *You take a pretty hard attitude on people who leave the club.*

Jennings: I don't hold it against anyone. Wilkins, Stones, Feuerbach, we're still all very good friends. But I don't take anyone back. The same principle applies to good business. It's not good for the continuity; good team rapport.

T&FN: But you don't place any restraints on anyone who wants to train with someone else?

Jennings: Not at all. In fact, I'm certainly not a coach, although I may be more of a coach than some people who masquerade themselves as coaches. But I'm a manager.

I want them to train with individual coaches if that's what they think is best for their competition needs.

T&FN: I can recall Stones getting technical help from you, even after he left the club.

Jennings: Just by the years of watching events I've picked up a lot in the vault and high jump. And shot too. I've watched so many competitions by so many top people that I can tell where the height is in front of the bar, in back of the bar. Especially with someone like Dwight, who I saw compete in thousands and thousands of jumps.

I knew how he should look if he was doing things properly. I don't know the event, but I know Dwight.

T&FN: In a nutshell, why do you have so many fights with the AAU?

Jennings: It's our philosophy of

allowing athletes to train under the coaches they wish. It's totally in contradiction with the AAU's structure for clubs. They say that all athletes on your team must live in a specific district. In our case it was greater Los Angeles.

So if Francie Larrieu wants to train with Preston Davis in Austin, Texas, she would have to be off my team. If Mark Enyeart wants to train at Utah State, or Paul Cummings lives in Provo, Utah, they can't be on our team.

Except that there is not a great track program for non-collegiate athletes in the state of Utah. I feel it's more important to give opportunities to individual athletes than to conform to AAU rules.

But I'm not hypocritical; I don't violate rules. I just won't be a member. Other clubs, of course, have athletes from all over the country and just fake their residences. I don't operate in that manner.

For a long time we were the only non-AAU club, which they didn't like. They wrote to meet directors and told them to list us as unattached. Now there are other clubs, like Athletics West, which are non-AAU, but no letters go out for them.

It's still going on. All the Canadian meets this winter had a letter from Ollan Cassell saying that we had to be listed as unattached.

Of course, I have some rules myself: that we be listed as Pacific Coast Club or

we don't come. We tend to get the invitations.

T&FN: Do you have any hope of the country's track situation improving with the new restructuring?

Jennings: They're talking about reorganizing and having the AAU as the administrators, and I think the AAU has demonstrated if there is anything they cannot do it's administer.

It's like when I criticize the AAU and Cassell criticizes the PCC. If you don't like the PCC you can always change clubs, but if you don't like the AAU you're stuck.

All I'm really trying to do is take care of the 14 people of the Pacific Coast Club, not the issues of the sport in general. Sometimes these issues are solved because of leadership by the PCC, but I'm not directly involved in fighting the AAU.

T&FN: Do you think that without the PCC's lead things like Athletics West would have had a lot more trouble in getting off the ground?

Jennings: Definitely true. Also the way that athletes now travel to Europe; without our lead in 1971. We had to force travel permits out of the AAU because all of a sudden they lost their "junket" trips where they used to have their own coaches take athletes to Europe.

We started a lot of precedents—which we couldn't have done, incidentally, without the support of the USTFF. They gave us the necessary clout. □



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