

T&FN INTERVIEW

Tom Pukstys

by Jeff Hollobaugh

Indianapolis in 1988 marked the low point of Tom Pukstys's throwing career. Having finished last in the Olympic Trials qualifying with a throw of 200-7 (61.14)—hampered by a fractured spine—he watched as three other men earned tickets to Seoul.

Things have changed for Pukstys since then. . . or rather, he has made the changes happen. Last year the 25-year-old Illinois native threw the spear to an American Record 281-2 (85.70) in a season that saw him rank No. 5 in the world despite finishing 9th in the World Championships.

That doesn't mean it's an easy life. Not many post-collegians in the United States support themselves by throwing the javelin. Pukstys must compete in Europe through the summer in order to make ends meet. "I get by," he says.

In the off-season he trains. Next year, he returns to school, with an eye on a masters degree and a teaching and coaching career.

Early in this conversation, he hedges on a question and makes a confession: "I may not be throwing this season. I have a hip strain right now that I'm not so sure I'm going to recover from."

He doesn't want to make promises either way. "I'm going to be like I'm going to throw, but as of now I'm not sure."

What athlete is ever sure of what a season will bring? Still, most that we talk to brim with optimism, which ranges in probability from the likely to the fantastic. In talking with Pukstys, one notices that here is an exception. While he is certainly optimistic, he never stops analyzing those hopes with a brutal eye for reality:

T&FN: How come javelin throwers don't get a lot of attention in the U.S.?

Pukstys: If you're not doing very good why should you have any attention? Unless you're making an impact and making things happen for yourself, no one's really going to pay attention. I just make an effort to do more than I'm expected, then I get some attention.

You guys are interviewing me, see? I got on the cover last year. That's the biggest thing that ever happened to me. We get respect. But we have to really earn it. You're not going to get it for mediocre performances in any event.

T&FN: How would you rate last year's American Record as a performance?

Pukstys: It's ridiculous to say I'm disappointed. I'm very, very happy. But I don't think it's my ultimate throw yet. Not that I can throw a lot farther, but I still think I can throw a little bit farther. I'm starting to get close to maxing out my natural physical abilities. I don't have a whole lot left but I'm pretty sure I have some.

T&FN: You were at Sheffield last summer when Jan Zelezny threw his WR 313-10. Do you ever see yourself popping a throw like that?

Pukstys: No, I can't say I can. My brother, who was my original coach, says, "You may not see it now, but if you do throw 295 or 300, then you may find a way to see yourself throw really far." That's a pretty big step from what I've done. I first have to throw 282 before I can even think about 313-10. Right now, I don't even think about it. First I have to find what gets me to 90m [295-3], then I have to find what gets me to 95 [311-8].

T&FN: If you're able to compete, what are your goals for this year?

Pukstys: Every year I put down goals. I write them on an envelope. I'm not sure why I put goals down on an envelope.

One thing I lacked in '93—I didn't take advantage of days I felt great. I was just happy with what I had thrown and didn't go for it completely. I didn't cut myself loose like I used to do when I was younger. I used to find a zone. I wanted to, but I don't know why I



Victor Sailer/Agence Shot

“Track & field is a sport of Greek gods. Baseball is a sport of fat pigs. Baseball’s more than that of course, but that’s what hit me.”

seemed to back out. I just wasn’t into it 100% at certain competitions, even if I threw well.

I want to find that thing that gets me excited and puts me into the zone and finds me more power than I actually have. It’s all a mental thing.

For this year, I was counting on 90m, and to beat Jan Zelezny one time. I would love to beat that guy. He’s setting standards. I think he’s probably the best javelin thrower ever. Not because of what he’s won, but because he gets the most out of himself as an athlete, physically. He’s not very large in stature, and the distances he’s throwing are enormous.

T&FN: *You’re the American Record holder, but with the changes in the implement, and the ghost of Tom Petranoff, can you say you’re the best that the U.S. has ever produced?*

Pukstys: I have a lot to do before I move into that category. I think I’m on my way, if I continue to do what I’m doing. I can be in a position to be one of the best, maybe after about five more years of good success.

If South Africa didn’t exist, Tom Petranoff would still be an American. I look at what he did, while he was here and while he is still throwing. He has thrown 292-6 [89.16], and he’s still one of the best. He’s held the WR and he’s placed 2nd in the Worlds and he’s won the Goodwill Games. I haven’t done any of these things yet, so I don’t think I can compare to Petranoff.

Bob Roggy had a couple of awesome years, and the year that he was at his best—I haven’t had anything like that yet. I’ve got a long way to go.

T&FN: *Was there any one moment when you realized this is what you wanted to do for a living?*

Pukstys: When I was 16 I traveled to Lithuania to watch my brother graduate from med school there. At the time I was playing baseball and I was doing pretty well for myself. I was a pitcher/catcher for my high school team. I made an all-area team in catching and I could hit the ball pretty well.

It looked like I had a decent future. But we were losing so much that sometimes I felt like I was the only guy who was trying. I’d think, “I’m putting everything I got into it, but we’re still losing. This is just not as fun as it should be or could be.”

At the time, the sports figures I looked up to were pretty much baseball players. I remember a guy that used to play for the Cubs

named Rick Rueschel. I used to think baseball would be great. But then I see the guy and all I see is him chewing tobacco, spitting, a real heavy-set guy—it just didn’t appeal to me that much. I’m like, “Wow, maybe that’s not quite the way I want to go.”

I started to work a little bit with my brother and the javelin. He was going to compete in this meet. I met Romas Ubartas and Donatas Stukonis. You know Ubartas. Stukonis was a 69-foot shot putter. These guys were prime physical specimens. I’m like, “Boy, I’d like to look like these guys. Track & field is a sport of Greek gods. Baseball is a sport of fat pigs.” Baseball’s more than that of course, but that’s what hit me.

I get in this meet and throw 25-30 feet farther than I expected to throw. My brother said, “Look, I’m coming home, I can coach you. You could be big and strong and you can do all these things.”

The second major impact for me was the Keebler meet in ’86. My brother had to lie and squeeze to get me in there. The meet director was like, “Don’t embarrass us.”

I ended up winning the thing with a huge PR. I threw far enough to start thinking I didn’t need a whole lot more to go to the Olympics. I need another 30-40 feet. I started training really hard like a world class athlete should, and it started to fall into place for me.

T&FN: *How would other athletes describe you? A workaholic?*

Pukstys: I don’t think I’m a workaholic, because there are some athletes that probably train harder than me. I think they’d call me determined to do certain things and not afraid to take chances. A little bit lucky, but what I’ve earned I’ve paid the price for.

T&FN: *What do you do with your spare time?*

Pukstys: I got a motorcycle that I ride every day. I’m a little bit of a speed freak. I do a lot of racing. It’s a Kawasaki that does 180mph [290kph]. I keep myself going that way. I go to the race track a lot, and just do a lot of pleasure riding with a group of people here in Baton Rouge.

T&FN: *Ever worry about what a crash could do to your throwing?*

Pukstys: No. A lot of people say I’m nuts. My family thinks I’m insane. I’ve sacrificed so much that I’m almost—I’m not tired of it—I can’t hold in what I want to do anymore. I have to start doing things that I want to do, instead of just doing things that make me a better javelin thrower.

I try to wear as much protection as I can and I ride with a very careful head on my shoulders. But no matter what, the speeds that we ride at, you can’t say that you’re going to be careful. Yeah, I worry about falling all the time,

but if I’m meant to be hurt, I’ll get hurt. If not, I won’t.

T&FN: *Is throwing still fun for you?*

Pukstys: Yeah, but if I get hurt and can’t throw, that kills me. If I really had a choice right now, I wouldn’t go to Europe to compete. I would just stay home and throw the javelin at smaller meets. It was the sport itself that gave me the goals of winning the Olympics and all that. That’s the epitome of the sport: winning an Olympic medal.

But I throw because I love to throw things. If I had a choice, I would just throw rocks on the beach for the rest of my life. That’s what I did as a kid. When I was 3 or 4 years old, I was just whipping rocks into Lake Michigan. I used to think of it as normal to go to the beach and throw rocks for an hour.

In high school I went with my friends to the beach and they were like, “Where you goin’?” And I’m like, “To throw rocks. What are you guys doing? You’re laying around, to get tans? What are you guys, nuts?” And they’re like, “What are you, nuts?” I thought it was totally normal. I just loved to do it. I thought everybody did.

That’s why I throw the javelin. It’s the purest throwing sport in the world. If I want to continue to do it, I have to go to Europe to make money. It’s almost a vicious circle.

T&FN: *How much longer will you stay in?*

Pukstys: I don’t know. This injury has made me think. I’ve put a lot into track & field, and I’ve loved the sport more than anything I ever imagined I would love in my life. My whole life revolves around my throwing. I’ve made tremendous sacrifices in a lot of different ways. But I’m not so sure sometimes that I get out what I put in, and that’s disheartening.

Maybe in 3-4 years I’ll still be throwing. With the Olympics being in Atlanta, a lot of good things could happen.

But I still have a good arm and I still think about playing baseball. You could be a benchwarmer cleaning up sunflower seeds and still make more money in a year than I make

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PUKSTYS IN A NUTSHELL

Tomas P. Pukstys was born May 28, 1968, in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and is 6-2/206. Graduated from Stagg HS (Palos Hills, Ill) in ’86, and DuPage JC in ’88. Competed for Florida ’89-’90. Currently represents the New York AC. He set the American Record in the javelin last summer.

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

Year	Age	Affiliation	Javelin	Majors
’85	16/17	Ill HS	63.60/208-8hs	5)US Jr
’86	17/18	*	75.38/247-4hs	—
’87	18/19	DuPage JC	71.34/234-1	—
’88	19/20	*	75.72/248-5	29q)OT
’89	20/21	Florida	74.82/245-6 (x, 5)	4)NC, 5)USA, 1)OF
’90	21/22	*	83.30/273-3 (x, 2)	4)NC
’91	22/23	Mazda	81.68/268-0 (x, 3)	3)USA, 26q)WC
’92	23/24	*	83.20/272-11 (7, 1)	1)OT, 10)OG, 4)WCp
’93	24/25	NYAC	85.70/281-2 (5, 1)	1)USA, 9)WC

Pukstys —cont. from p. 51:

in 2 or 3 years as the AR holder in the javelin.

T&FN: *There has got to be more to the decision than money for you.*

Pukstys: I want to continue to throw as long as I continue to feel I can throw farther. When I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror—and I will know it—that I can't throw farther than I have done, then I have to start thinking about other things.

I will stop traveling to Europe. I may still throw at the USA Championships. I would miss that and so I'll continue to do that as long as I'm physically capable. But I won't feel pressured to think 80m [262-5] and beat people like Backley and Zelezny. It's hell to do that.

T&FN: *Do you still have hopes to do well in the Olympics?*

Pukstys: I'm going to try to do good, but right now I've had two bombs in major finals. In Barcelona, I was just glad to be there. But it did bother me that I didn't do better.

In Stuttgart, I really wanted to do a lot better. I didn't expect to win a medal but I was hoping to be in the top 6. I made some mistakes warming up; I overwarmed up, but still I was in shape to throw 80m in my sleep at the time.

To me it wasn't fun. It wasn't why I throw. My body shut down on me and I ended up hurting my back. It was a major disappointment, but when I walked away with it I wasn't as angry as I was in Barcelona, either. I just thought, "Who cares?" The only people I disappointed are those who don't know me or don't understand why I throw.

Other people in the javelin community said, "You should have done this or you should have done that." I thought, "No, I shouldn't have done anything. Maybe I don't even want to throw in the Worlds."

I would like to do very well in Atlanta, but I am not going to make it a major goal. It's going to be a goal, but not one of those things that I'm going to be disappointed if I don't do well. I'm going to try my hardest to win a medal or to win the whole thing. But my goal right now is to continue to improve, to throw 282 and to see how much farther I can go.

I realistically think I can push that 300 mark in my career eventually. I have to have several things happen for me. One, I have to stay injury free. Two, I have to train my ass off, and I have to think of myself as being more wicked than I ever thought of myself being.

I know what it took me to throw 281, and I've got to be 19-feet more wild in my brain, faster, more explosive, more horsepower, more speed, more technique, more everything—19 feet farther. The third thing is I've got to have a lot of luck for these things to happen.

I'm definitely capable of it. My arm speed is there. I've shown myself in training sessions that I have the capability. □

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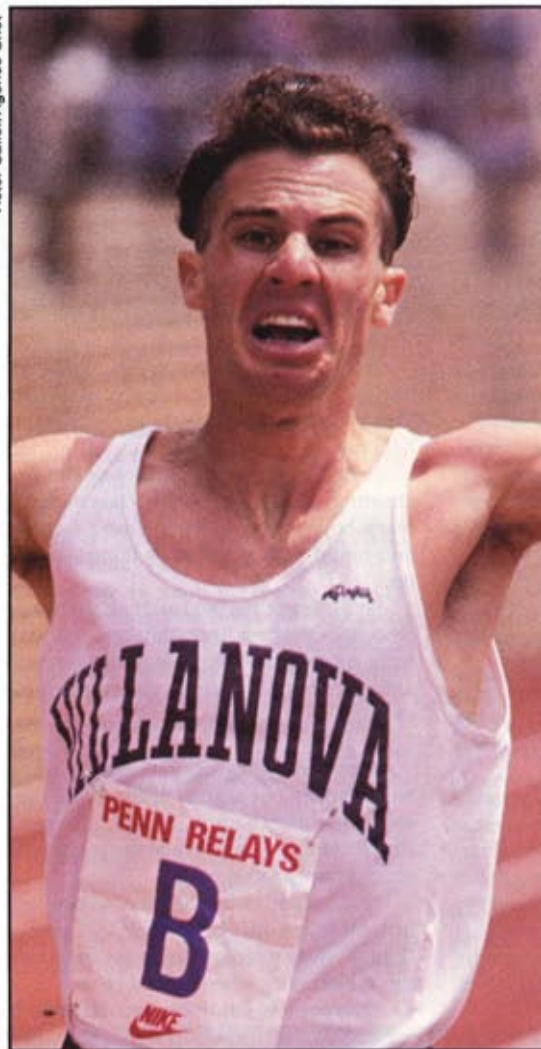
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