

by Sieg Lindstrom

T&FN INTERVIEW

Adam Nelson



If Adam Nelson had ridden off into the sunset after finally claiming a world title last year, would you have been surprised? Especially if you knew the 30-year-old putter—whose eBay sponsorship auction grabbed attention in '05—would be advertising “Space For Rent” on his jersey again in '06?

It might have made sense, but the two-time Olympic silver medalist known for his roaring, stomping, t-shirt-tossing pre-throw ritual is more complex than all that. With the blessing of Lacy, his wife of two years, Nelson says he still has “unfinished business” to settle.

Although temptation to take his Ivy League education off to the real business world loomed large after he lost the closest Olympic shot competition in history, Nelson stuck to his big guns after Athens. Persistence has become a Nelson trademark. He's the only athlete besides Virgilijus Alekna to have medaled at every outdoor global championships this millennium.

On the sponsorship issue, Nelson admits, “Don't get me wrong: I've got my price,” but he also has a higher aim: a sponsorship relationship that could lead to his next career.

Taking that stand, he says, has renewed his zest for throwing. Guided by coach Don Babbitt in Athens, Georgia, Nelson says he is ready for a big '06—concentrated on the indoor and U.S. seasons due to the shot's absence from the Golden League this year.

We spoke with Nelson after Boston and Millrose (where he had the flu). He claimed his so-so start belies his true current form:

Nelson: I'm in great shape right now—certainly the best shape I've been in at this time of year if not anytime in the past few years.

T&FN: In terms of overall conditioning?

Nelson: Physical conditioning and technical preparation. I never really took any time off after Worlds last year. I think I took maybe 9

days off or something like that, and then kind of hopped back into it and never really lost touch with the throwing. But I hit the weights pretty hard early on.

I made some major changes in my program just to freshen things up. I always make little changes every year.

T&FN: Any specific changes you would cite?

Nelson: I think I realized how important it is to include all the drill work that I really hate to do. I think every thrower or field event athlete hates to do the drill work, but the drill work is so important, and I'd gotten away from it until last year.

T&FN: What do you mean by drill work?

Nelson: Throwing drills. It won't be easy to describe, but basically full turns with a stick on your back, balance drills, things like that. I've really increased my drill work volume this year and I really haven't been lifting as much as I have in the past this year.

“My friends would call it my evil twin ... He comes out in the ring or when I’m angry. It’s kind of like my version of The Incredible Hulk”



RON COCHRAN/GETTY IMAGES

The past two years I’d been very weight-room intense and I wanted to give my body a break from that and get back into the athletic training.

T&FN: *You are extremely intense during competitions. Is that true in the rest of your life?*

Nelson: Yes and no. I’m very intense and very goal oriented in most of the professional aspects of my life—or nonsocial aspects of my life I should say. But I think once I get out of a competitive environment and once I remove myself from anything that’s slightly competitive, I am not that intense; I’m a very laid-back and relaxed guy.

T&FN: *Does competing just bring the foaming-at-the-mouth pre-throw ritual out of you, or did you consciously develop it as a technique?*

Nelson: Well, I really think having an older brother made a big difference in how I approach most tasks—whether athletic or academic or whatever it is. I was always competing

with him, and he is two years older and was always bigger and faster and stronger growing up. And more well-read because he had two years on me. The only way I could come close to breaking even with him was to up my intensity level.

The other thing is my dad is probably one of the most intense individuals in his professional life.

T&FN: *What does he do?*

Nelson: He’s a lawyer and he played football as well. He played at Mississippi State; he was the center there. I think he and I have a very similar personality when we’re on the field and off the field.

I’m a completely different person on the field. When I go out there I don’t care who’s watching, I don’t care about anything other than the task at hand. And I have a very simple task: It’s to throw a 16lb steel ball as far away from me as possible.

I’m not a very big guy when it comes to throwers [see p. 28], but I have to channel every single ounce of energy—every single ounce of intensity, passion, everything—into that one moment before I throw—just get it all in there. And the only way that I can do that is the way I do it. I get loud and I internalize everything...

T&FN: *How long does it take you to build into that state before a competition?*

Nelson: I like to think that it’s something that I can turn off and on, but my wife would differ. She’d probably say that about 2–3 days before a major competition I start to focus more on that and not on what’s going on around me at the time.

T&FN: *Is that hard for her?*

Nelson: Well, she grew up with athletes as well. Her dad was a professional football player and her brother’s been an athlete all through his life and she was an athlete growing up as well. So I think she understands what it takes mentally to get prepared.

T&FN: *It’s been said on meet telecasts that you have multiple personalities that come out when you throw. Is that accurate?*

Nelson: I suppose. I think that’s accurate I guess. That kind of goes back to my college days when I wasn’t the mild-mannered gentleman you speak to right now.

I certainly had a personality that came out when I went out. I don’t

really do that too much anymore, but my friends would call it my evil twin or Nelly or Poobah or something like that.

I guess that’s the part of him that’s still alive. He comes out in the ring or when I’m angry. It’s kind of like my version of The Incredible Hulk.

T&FN: *When you’re competing do you feel angry or just amped up?*

Nelson: Kind of absent of emotion. I know it doesn’t look like that when I’m out there, but I’m so focused on what I’m trying to do. The one thing you can’t do when you’re an elite thrower—at least I can’t do it—is be overly excited and throw well.

Because I know that that’s a problem I have—I get very, very excited for competitions—I get out there and do my whole pre-throw routine as a way to just kind of burn off extra energy.

So if you watch as I move toward the circle, the second I enter the circle it all stops, for the most part, and I’m just focusing on breathing. That’s when the world around me just stops.

T&FN: *When did you first think you could compete at this level?*

Nelson: I had a great experience with my college coach, Carl Wallin. He’s been a mentor and a coach and just a constant source of advice and inspiration for me for years. But when I was in college, I think maybe my sophomore or junior year—probably when I got in trouble for something nonathletic or academics related—he said, “Adam, you’re

Nelson Facts

Personal: born Atlanta, Georgia, 7/7/75; 5-11¹/₄/254 (1.81/115)

•PRs: 73-10¹/₄/22.51 (10W, 6A), 71-3³/₄/21.661 (13W, 7A)

•Schools: Lovett HS (Atlanta, Georgia) '93; Dartmouth '97

•Coaches: Carl Wallin college, then Robert Weir, now Don Babbitt.

•Major Meets: 2)USAJ, 1)PAJ '93; 1)USAJ, 1)WJ '94; 13)NCAA '95; 9)NCAA '96; 1)NCAA, 8)US '97; 3)US '98; nm)US '99; 1)OT, 2)OG '00; 2)US, 2)WC '01; 1)US, 1)WCp '02; 4)US, 2)WC '03; 1)OT, 2)OG '04; 2)US, 1)WC '05

•World/U.S. Rankings: '97—x, 9; '98—9, 4; '99—x, 6; '00—1, 1; '01—2, 2; '02—1, 1; '03—3, 1; '04—2, 2; '05—1, 1

A Heavy Start To The Indoor Season

Adam Nelson’s immediate goal for the ‘06 campaign was to “really get prepared for the indoor season and really push for the indoor World Record,” but it didn’t quite work out that way:

“Unfortunately, I’ve had a couple of things that have just pushed it off a little bit longer, or at least delayed my physical conditioning to a little bit later than I originally planned.

“It’s more the timing. I get the bonehead award of the year—at least up to this point anyway—because I was breaking in an indoor shot for Boston and didn’t realize that it was 2lb [c1kg] heavy.

“I should have been able to tell. In one way it’s really encouraging that I couldn’t really tell and my distances weren’t too far off during practice what I normally throw in practice. So when I got to Boston, I weighed in the shot I’d been training with the last couple of weeks and they said, ‘Oh, Adam, your shot’s a little bit heavy.’

“I said, ‘Well, how much?’ and they said, ‘Two pounds.’

“That explains a lot because I was starting to have some issues with my pec and my shoulder. On one hand it’s like I was throwing an 18lb shot; that really messes up my timing. But on the other hand, there really wasn’t that much difference between the 18 and what I’ve been throwing with the 16. I never throw an 18lb shot. Certainly not intentionally.”

Adam Nelson

screwing things up here. You've got a real good chance of doing something post-collegiately. Just don't get hurt; don't mess up your life."

He said, "From the ages of 18–25 guys are stupid. You have a real gift here and I really think you can do something after college."

He just kind of reinforced that my last couple years of college, and after my last term of eligibility in the winter of '98, he said, "I really think you should do this for 2 or 3 more years."

I'd already, I think, signed off on it at that point that I was going to pursue it, and he kind of helped—facilitated my move to California [where he trained in '98 and '99] and introductions to [Stanford coach] Robert Weir and that whole move.

T&FN: You mentioned getting in trouble. Was that a specialty of yours back then?

Nelson: I don't know. I certainly enjoyed my time out. I can tell you that every time I got in trouble I was always doing something I probably shouldn't have been doing. I'm trying to speak in code here... every time I ever got in trouble in college it was always alcohol-related and it always happened between the hours of 12:00 and 3:00 in the morning or something like that. Fortunately, that's a long way away.

T&FN: How much do you train with Reese Hoffa?

Nelson: We don't do the same kind of program so I'd say we train around each other more than with each other. We do throw together quite a bit, but we don't do any of the lifting or conditioning together. We have completely different approaches to that side of our training.

T&FN: Do throwing practices get competitive with two 70-footers out there?

Nelson: No, I'd say for the most part it's

Size Doesn't Matter

Adam Nelson is clearly smaller than most of his rivals, but his philosophy has been that he can make up for that with athletic ability:

"I think part of the problem of being in an individual sport is that you don't think anybody's better than you are. It's true.

"If you ask John Godina who the best shot putter in the world is, he's probably going to say himself. You ask Reese Hoffa the same question and any of the other people.

"You may catch them at a moment of humility and they may say, 'Oh, I think this person is,' but really deep down inside they want to tell you, 'I am the best thrower in the world; I don't care what the results say. I can beat anybody on any day.'

"I think that even in college I had that attitude. I knew that I hadn't thrown as far as anybody else but I believed that I could throw farther than they could. So I think coach [Carl] Wallin sort of issued the challenge: 'You say that you can do these things. So let's see what you can do.' It was up to me to pursue it and I chose to pursue it."

pretty relaxed. We're able to put egos aside when we train, and if we were out there trying to beat each other every day, we both know that it would not benefit either one of us.

T&FN: So what drives you at this stage of your career?

Nelson: I enjoy it. That's the bottom line. I think last year I remembered how to enjoy the sport again. Part of it is due to the experience I had with sponsors. Going out on my own again reminded me how hard it is to make ends meet and train and compete when you don't have a paycheck coming in.

T&FN: That made it easier?

Nelson: It made it more real. It made it more fun to me. It reminded me of why I did this in the first place. When I started throwing full-time, I always told myself, "This isn't going to be a career for me."

When I graduated from college, I said, "Well, I'm going to go to California and train until the 2000 Olympics and then I'll start up my real career."

Then after 2000, I thought, "Wow! I really enjoyed this. I'm going to go for 4 more years."

At that point I made a bad decision and I decided to pursue it full-time. I think that's where I kind of started forgetting why I do this or why I started it all.

T&FN: Aren't you doing it full-time now?

Nelson: I'm doing it full-time at the moment. I'm actually going to take some classes in the spring and do some things to advance my next career.

T&FN: What will that career be?

Nelson: I will say that, whatever my next career is, I'm going to be very financially motivated. This sport is so much fun and I wouldn't trade my experience in this sport for anything else in the world, but unfortunately for me it's not necessarily the most financially rewarding.

There was an article I read recently about how much money I made last year, and one of the things that they neglected to mention was that I had two paychecks last year, and they both came in December. For 11 months, it's tough,



VICTOR SALLER/PHOTO RUI

For the second year in a row Nelson is advertising himself as a free-agent on the open market.

but you can't go and experience something like that if you don't love it.

T&FN: Has it been tough to sell the financial sacrifice to your wife?

Nelson: She's been great. She's got a job and she's teaching right now. She understands that this is still short term—it's not going to be a career for me. And she understands that I have a really short window of opportunity—and shortening by the day—to pursue these kinds of things.

She was a true inspiration to me coming out of 2004. I don't think if she hadn't set me straight at the end of 2004 that I would have kept going.

T&FN: Set you straight?

Nelson: She just sat me down and said, "If you stop right now, I'll still love you, but I also know that you'll regret it for the rest of your life. You have some things that are unfinished business in the sport. So go out there and do it, and we'll figure out how it's going to work." □