T&FN INTERVIEW

Adam Nelson

One of the finest competitors ever, the sorta-retired Olympic shot champ is now firing his help to improve the lot of his fellow athletes

by Sieg Lindstrom

Olympic gold medalist—all with his meenow stop the pendulum on Friday sport. World Championships gold medalist. Essentially, there was no major shut out Adam Nelson. In fact, it was never to be. 15-26 years at the world-class level. World junior, NCAAs for Dartmouth, the USATF comes 4 times. At 40, three years after retirement, Nelson still owns the world’s No. 10 all-time mark.

A Return To Competition?

Rumor has it that since Adam Nelson turned 40 in July he has been eying a return to competition and the Masters World Championships this year—if they’re not with one of USATF’s sponsors—is going to have to sign a code of conduct that will violate their current sponsorship contract, if they have one. There’s no alignment at all between what’s good for the athletes and what’s good for the federations.

I applaud USATF’s effort to expand and build upon the national brand, but they need to do that, but as they do that they’re going to create conflict with the athletes and their sponsors. It’s already happened. Just this summer in Monaco you had a B-team in the 4x1 that couldn’t race because they had athletes that weren’t sponsored by a USATF sponsor, their sponsors didn’t want them to run in gear from another company.

That’s the biggest problem of that company and you can be critical of that sponsor. What you can be critical of is that the rules have continued to expand in a way that knowingly create this conflict.

They’ve played this game of chicken for a long time and now the guys are starting to call each other on it. I think it’s a cause for concern and I hope that the athletes are aware enough of what’s going on to understand that this has nothing to do with any one sponsor as much as the way the structure of the sponsorships that USATF builds.

USATF should not have a sponsorship program in which the majority of those revenue come from one or two of the main sponsors for the sport unless they have truly hammered out an agreement that says, “This is what the federation sponsorship looks like and this is what the athlete sponsorships are going to look like.”

And even I caution against having one predominant sponsor that sponsors the federation and the sport because that’s all we’re all drinking from the same well. That’s just not good.

USATF probably would suggest that athletes should take my any obligations they have with USATF’s Advisory Committee. Nelson: That doesn’t work. All of the volunteers on the committee at every level are great people, they have great intentions. They’re not empowered to hold USATF accountable. USATF can negotiate a deal with the AAC and then turn around 6 months later and change their mind and not have any repercussions. People say, “Well, that won’t happen.” It has happened. It has happened in the past, it will happen this year, but the interest of USATF will change from year to year, and the AAC cannot hold USATF legally accountable if the athletes don’t get involved in the conversation.

That’s why it’s a major company. They say, “The marketing budget for this year is $2 million,” then they get 6 months down the road, they say, “What’s a little lighter and they bump the budget down to $1 million.

Nelson In A Nutshell


Fireside Chat

Nelson: We (the TFAA) are looking to really leverage social media to draw more attention to this because there’s still no communication at all between the federation and the athletes. The conversations that you get are usually mandates and it’s not conversational.

That’s a real problem when the people aren’t going to stand together and start having collective conversations in the direction that they want.

Everybody in the sport— and I don’t care if you don’t have a sponsor, they’re not going to stand together and start having collective conversations in the direction that they want.

We’ve all talked about collective bargaining, that is something that the TFAA is not currently in a position as an organization to do, but this is the stuff that people want to do. You really want to go in and say, “Hey, USATF, you’re going to be held to the same standard that the NFL Players Association holds the NFL to.”

We think we’ve got between $6 and 10 million that comes to the athletes through USATF if USATF is trying to take over the profession and expand the national team brand to do so, they’re really failing to meet the expectations of a profession.

You know what the marketing director has to do? Deal with it. That’s exactly what’s happened with the AAC in the past on more than one occasion.

But it’s not just a problem with USATF. It’s a problem with the IOC and IAAF, too, and I would say the further up the chain you get, the worse it actually is.

Our AAC puts in a real concerted effort, but they’re not really intended to deal with those types of subjects. They’re meant to deal with safety issues, minimum standards, national team needs—not the professional side of the sport.

T&FN: You and the TFAA bit off a bit more than you could chew in the last few years in that the athletes as a group were annoyed that they didn’t play a “players association.” Obviously we’ve tried to continue to make the case.

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For athlete pensions, the benchmark is 10% per year, or 10% or 15% either side of 10%. That’s what you need to understand that the athletes are expecting to see a revenue figure that comes in close to $20 million a year. That’s the starting point, period. And if we’re not there, that’s fine. We’re just not going to race in the races that you want.

That’s what we’d love to be able to say, that’s what we as athletes need to do. And we’re not there yet, but I will say that while what you’re saying is correct, we’re also very desperate for scraps, the organization you’re negotiating with the USATF of 20 years ago. It doesn’t have a $5-10 million budget, it’s projecting a $40 million budget, and you don’t want to lock yourself into a deal that allows them to do anything they want.

Five or 10 years down the road if they’re blowing out expectations and hitting $60 million it looks awful. That’s why you hire experts and set up contracts that are legally enforceable.

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Advice For The U.S. Squad

American shot putters have won 7 of the last 10 World Champs. We asked Adam Nelson about that legacy and for his advice to yearly world leader Joe Kovacs and the 4-deep U.S. squad as they head to Beijing to try to unseat two-time champion David Storl of Germany.

Nelson credits John Godina, who won the WC titles in ’95, ’97 and ’01 with starting the current U.S. momentum in the shot circle. He explains:

John had no connection to drugs, no positive drug tests. I think that really set a precedent on how to do it right.
You’ll see a lot of the younger guys, starting with Reese Hoffa and now Joe Kovacs, they were 2 or 3 years out of college before they really started hitting the international level. I don’t think they would have had that opportunity had a guy like John not had such a long, productive and drug-free career.
He was followed by me and others that created this new model that said you don’t have to be a drugged-up athlete to compete.
I think we also established in ’99 and 2000 and 2001 that not only is our event pretty entertaining, it can really dominate a whole track meet when we have great performances.
I always go back to the 2000 Olympic Trials when we nearly froze the whole meet because the crowd wouldn’t be quiet because the competition was so phenomenal.
I think when we had that and the same core of people with one changing every other year or so for so long, we were able to build a culture or brand following of shot putters. I think these guys now are benefiting from it.
My advice to Joe Kovacs and all the throwers is you can’t control what happens outside the circle. Develop a game plan. The way they structure the warmups and then the process through the track to the competition field really doesn’t give any field enterer a really strong opportunity for a great performance.
You warm up, you go sit down for basically an hour and 15 minutes, you don’t get a chance to move around a whole lot. If you do, it’s not on a circle. There’s not an opportunity to take more than two warmup throws.
So practice that now, go out and do a morning qualifier and evening final, practice the game plan. And then going back to my first point, the only thing you can control is what’s inside the circle.
Make sure when you get in the circle that you own the circle and that you dictate how you’re going to enter and leave that circle because once the shot leaves your hand you can’t do anything about it.
If you own the circle, trust me, you’ll own the competition. Any event I ever competed in where I really felt the circle was mine, nobody could beat me.

If you’re projecting $40 million in revenue next year alone, that’s less than 10%. Then they like to say, “This doesn’t include the USOC athlete funding.” Well, let’s not confuse things.
This is what a car dealer does to you: “We’re going to give you a great deal on the trade-in,” and then we’re going to screw you on this other thing, let’s just keep those two things separate.
The USOC money is good, we don’t need to talk about that. We need to talk about the $40 million they have coming in now.
T&FN: There is a consensus in most quarters of the sport that intelligent brainstorming is needed on meet presentation, the structure and length of meets, etc.
Nelson: Yes, I think that the athletes also have to lead change in the business model of track & field. I don’t have the answers there; that’s well beyond my station. But I will say the model for a track & field meet doesn’t work from a business standpoint.
People ask, Why do people go to track & field at the Olympics? Is it because it’s track & field or because it’s the Olympics? Why do people go to Zürich? Because it’s a track & field meet or because it’s just a really cool sporting event in Zürich?
There’s a handful of examples that show the model can be successful but there’s a million examples that show that it doesn’t work. We have to have a conversation about what direction we want the sport to go in.
Quite frankly, right now I’m really worried that because the primary sponsor pool for us is driven completely by the running-shoe market—a huge, huge market—that we’re going to have an ever-larger bias towards just distance-based professional events and the other events will get lost in the mix.
I can make a very compelling argument for why the sponsors would do that from their business perspectives; I’m not faulting them. I just want to make sure that these conversations happen so that if we really care about track & field as an entity, we can be sure that some version of the sport as a whole is still here for future generations.
I think that one thing is really clear: There are a lot of people that are very, very passionate about this sport. Not just specific events, but about the whole sport.
What we need to do is find a viable business model for track & field that works outside of the Olympic cycle.