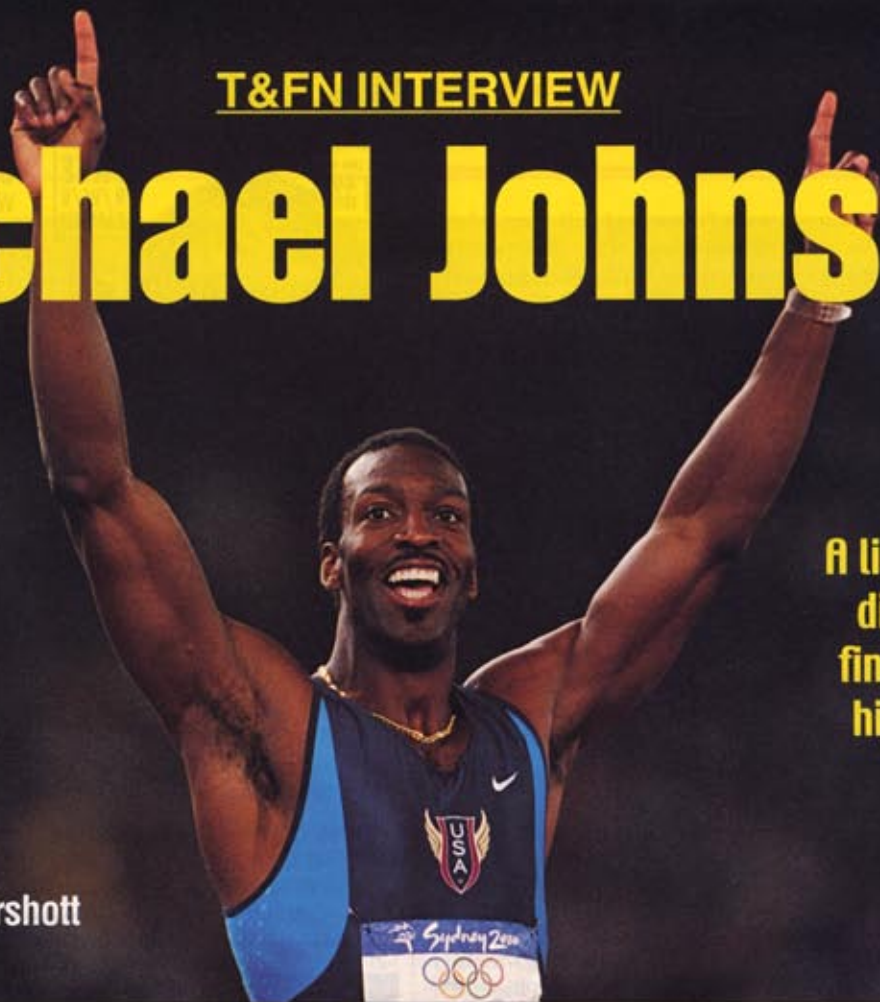


T&FN INTERVIEW

# Michael Johnson



by Jon Hendershott

A living legend discusses the final stages of his incredible career

**M**ichael Johnson's career has been one of firsts: the first man to win an Olympic 200/400 double; the first man to defend a Games 400 crown; the first to win the 2/4 duo at the Worlds ('95); the first to win two Worlds 400s in a row, let alone the four straight Johnson owns; the first, and only, relayist to clock a sub-43 leg (42.94 in '93); the only 1-lapper to World Rank No. 1 six years straight.

In the Olympics and Worlds, Johnson has won only gold medals. After an initial disappointment at the '92 Games of going out in his 200 semi when weakened following food poisoning, he collected a 4x4 win, followed by the '96 double and a 400/4x4 pair in Sydney. Johnson claimed nine golds at five editions of the World Champs.

It has been a glittering career of history-making achievements, but now it's almost over. The 33-year-old Texas native says that not only was Sydney his last Olympics, but 2001 will also be his final season.

Regardless of how extensive it turns out to be, Johnson's final campaign certainly will be just like the others in his 11-year reign among the world's elite: top-class.

Because performing at an ultra-high level always has been MJ's trademark. He has prided himself on his consistency of performance.

But now Johnson is in the homestretch of his career, looking ahead to new business opportunities and especially to family life with wife Kerry and infant son Sebastian. He shared his thoughts from his new Marin County home, just north of San Francisco:

**T&FN:** After you defended your Olympic 400 title in Sydney, you said it was "my last major competition. I'll take some time to decide what my plans [will be] for the future." Have you made any decisions about competing in 2001?

**Johnson:** Nothing concrete, but I would say it's most likely I won't run the Worlds. It's not really something I have anything to gain from. I don't think I could get myself really motivated for it. If I could, then I'd certainly be there. But I'm not the kind of person who would go just because it's the Worlds.

I think that's a big part of why I've been able to win the ones I have won and be successful at what I've been doing: that motivation always has been there. [Coach] Clyde [Hart] and I would sit down after each season and figure out what the goals would be for the next season. For next year, it's just not there.

**T&FN:** So the motivation level is now much different for you toward any title meet—even the Games—than it was say four years ago?

**Johnson:** It is. Last season, if it hadn't been for the Olympics, I may not have been out there. At the same time, last year wasn't Atlanta all over again either. My motivation going to Sydney was totally different from going into Atlanta. Once you've done something, you definitely can't get the feeling back of doing it for the first time.

**T&FN:** What were your motivations for the past two Games?

**Johnson:** In Atlanta, winning the 200/400 double was a big motivation. But there also

was the drive just to become an individual Olympic champion. I had that hanging over my head: possibly being an athlete who had been ranked No. 1 in the world by you guys and won several world titles, but who hadn't won an individual Olympic gold. That would be terrible. So that was a huge motivation, as well as the Games being in the U.S.

For Sydney, the motivation was to again represent my country in the Olympics and to enjoy it. But also to become the first man to repeat in the 400. So it was different motivation from '96.

**T&FN:** When you finally got the 400 World Record in Seville, and then after defending in Sydney, you said you had done everything you set out to achieve. So there's nothing left?

**Johnson:** That's definitely true. At this point, I feel I've done everything I wanted to do. Of course, I could think of other things, so we can't say I've done everything that could possibly be done. I could try to run 42 seconds, which is something I hoped to do last season but I wasn't able to get that done.

I've always said—even long before I broke the 400 record—that if I didn't get a particular thing, I didn't get it. But I'm not going to be disappointed. In the bigger picture, I've had much more success than I ever thought I would have in the sport.

But when Clyde and I first considered what I wanted to accomplish in my professional career, running 42 seconds was something I didn't even think about. Certainly winning the

Olympics, doubling in the 200 and 400 at the Worlds and the Games, breaking the records in both—all of those things I knew I was capable of doing and I was able to do them all.

**T&FN:** *Most of the time, was your main object to win the big races rather than point specifically at breaking a World Record?*

**Johnson:** I always felt that someone would win the Worlds or the Olympics, whether it was me or somebody else. But it's not written anywhere, not guaranteed, that a World Record will be broken. They just happen when they happen.

But to win the majors, win the titles, there might be only one opportunity every few years; definitely only every four years in terms of the Olympics. There are limited opportunities to do that.

**T&FN:** *It must be the ideal situation, then, when an athlete can do what you did twice, win a major title and set a World Record doing it.*

**Johnson:** I've always competed better at major championships. I'll always run the best race I can, but I've been more motivated by the Worlds and Olympics. There's more at stake and that's when I run best.

As for World Records, you're going to have a better chance to set a record when you're also trying to win the race and run the best you can for a reason other than just trying to break the record. I've always felt that's how records happened.

The added advantage to that is, at the Worlds or Olympics, everybody will be watching. There's a much larger audience and, no matter what athletes say, we're all concerned with our legacy and what we leave behind. You want people to see those performances, not just read about them in some little story in the paper.

**T&FN:** *Has that always been the primary demand you placed on yourself: win first, then let everything else follow? Or have the demands changed as your career has changed?*

**Johnson:** I'd be lying if I said it was only about winning the race. Early in my career, it was mainly about that. But as I started to establish more dominance, that gave me the luxury of being

able to look at things more in the sense of, "OK, if I don't mess up today, I'll win this race."

Then, especially in the 400, I could look more at taking some chances. Like in the 400 at

*out your career been a major factor in the high level of consistency you have maintained?*

**Johnson:** It definitely has been important having the same coach. Over the years, one of

the most important things to me has been consistency. A big reason I have been consistent is that I maintained consistency with the person who is most important in any athlete's career, the coach. We know each other very well, I know what the workouts are and we know what the objectives are.

**T&FN:** *Can you say which is your single most satisfying performance of all?*

**Johnson:** For just one race, it definitely is the 200 in Atlanta. I was under such pressure, yet achieved so much by that single race. Up to then, I had considered myself a 200 runner first but that was my first Olympic title for the 200. And by doing that, I completed the double.

Then there was just the time itself; to shatter the World Record and finally do something spectacular and that I always felt I had the ability to do. To break the record in the Trials [with 19.66] was good, but I felt I was much better than that.

A World Record isn't something that just anybody can do but it does happen a lot in the sport, relatively speaking. I mean breaking a record by 0.06, like I did in the 200 the first time, can happen quite a bit. But the 19.32 showed how good I really was and what I always felt I was capable of doing.

Like running the 42 leg on the relay in '93 really opened up a bunch of eyes and showed people, "This guy can do some really spectacular things."

But that was a relay leg, so it was discounted somewhat. The 19.32 is something even the general sports fan can understand. So I was able to accomplish all those things in just one race, which is why it's the single most satisfying race to me.

**T&FN:** *How about for the 400?*

**Johnson:** It would be the World Record, of course, but I also have to mention the '97 Worlds. That really showed people I could win from anywhere on the track, from anyplace in the race and while not 100% fit. But I still could go in and win.

It showed people something else I'm very proud of, something I always thought was automatic but in the last few years I've had to call on—that I'm not afraid to lose. I'll go out and put it on the line even when I'm not 100%. I've just always had that much confidence in myself.

**T&FN:** *Have you ever considered what your*



The last race of MJ's career in a U.S. uniform resulted in a gold—as had the 13 other Olympic and WC finals which preceded it.

the '99 Worlds, I could get out a little harder in the first 60-70m and get a faster 100 split, if I wanted to break the World Record. I could have easily decided to go out slower and I'd still win the race.

But the dominance I was able to establish over the years afforded me the luxury of taking a few more chances. And you've got to take chances to break a World Record—but you also know that going a little faster, or running faster in one segment, is something you haven't done before. So you're taking a chance, with no assurance it's going to work. If what you try works against you, then how much cushion do you have?

**T&FN:** *Has having Clyde as your coach through-*

**"At this point, I feel I've done everything I wanted to do. Of course, I could think of other things, so we can't say I've done everything that could possibly be done."**

# Michael Johnson *SPRINTER DELUXE*

Longtime AP track writer Bert Rosenthal has covered every Olympics since 1976 and is a former president of TAFWA (Track & Field Writers of America)—who better to put superstar Michael Johnson's exploits into historical perspective? But this slender volume is not just a profile of Johnson's life in track & field and a recitation of the highlights of that career, it is a handsome pictorial with 36 color photos of MJ in action. 56 pages. 2000. \$12.95



Order from Track & Field News, 2570 El Camino Real, Suite 606, Mountain View, CA 94040. Add \$1.95 postage/handling. Calif. residents add 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ % sales tax (94¢). Visa/MC/Amex orders welcome by phone (650/948-8188) or fax (650/948-9445).



## Great documentary on Steve Prefontaine FIRE ON THE TRACK

### The Steve Prefontaine Story

This is not one of those fictionalized theatrical films about Pre, but the marvelous television documentary that came out in 1995. We recently purchased a stock of these and are offering them at a good price to our customers.

Great footage on most of Pre's most important races, with on-camera commentary by Bill Bowerman, Dave Bedford, Dana Carvey, Dick Buerkle, Jeff Galloway, Bill Dellinger, Kenny Moore, Alberto Salazar, Frank Shorter, Ian Stewart, Lasse Viren, Mac Wilkins, and Dave Wottle.

*Narrated by Ken Kesey*

**A terrific addition to your track video library**

\$22.50 from Track & Field News, 2570 El Camino Real, Suite 606, Mountain View, CA 94040. Add \$2.50 postage/handling. Calif. residents add 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ % sales tax. Visa/MC/Amex orders accepted by phone. Call 650/948-8188, 9-5pm PT, weekdays. Fax 650/948-9445.

*biggest disappointment might be?*

**Johnson:** That would have to be Barcelona. It was my first Olympics and I had ranked No. 1 in the world for 200 the previous two years. I had already done some things that hadn't been done before. So there were a lot of expectations, I knew I was ready and I was in my best shape ever, up to that point. So not having the opportunity to compete at full strength was a big disappointment.

**T&FN:** You mentioned legacies: how do you want to be remembered in the history of the sport?

**Johnson:** I hope people will remember what I came into the sport for and what I did. I came in and immediately started doing things that no one had done before. I stayed consistent in that for 11 years.

I'd like to be remembered for bringing the 200 and 400 together and being the first man to do it at the Olympic and Worlds level. I've been able to raise the level of performance in both events. I'd just like to be remembered for what I did.

**T&FN:** Running has made up a huge part of who you are for about half of your life. Have you thought about what you might do once your running is definitely over?

**Johnson:** I've gotten involved in several things already, just so the transition won't be too crazy. I'll continue doing broadcast work. I sit on the board of directors of a couple of companies and do advising and consulting for them. That has been interesting and I've learned a lot.

I have been very selective about that, just like the endorsements I've done. A lot of companies are interested in that, but I've been picking and choosing carefully. I probably will add a few more companies. It's financially rewarding, yes, but I also learn a lot and it keeps me busy.

**T&FN:** Can you devote the same kind of attention and be motivated toward those other areas as you were toward running?

**Johnson:** I think those things are so different—and I don't want to give the same kind of concentration to just one area. [Running] took so much of me... but I also don't think the great majority of people can begin to understand why I've been able to be so successful and consistent over such a long period of time.

It's because I've been blessed with a certain amount of talent and I'm not afraid to go out and work hard. But it's also because I've been extremely focused. I spent my time training and planning and studying and figuring out just what does it take to run 43.18? How can I keep winning no matter what the other runners do?

I spent my time figuring those things out, how to run really fast day in and day out. That's been a huge commitment. My career has been great but now that it's done, I don't want to do that same thing with something else.

I have a much more relaxed lifestyle now and I want to raise my son and be a good parent. That's a long-term commitment, too, and I want to be able to do that, do it well and just have fun. □