

T&FN INTERVIEW

MIKE CONLEY

by Jon Hendershott

Mike Conley wears many different hats. Foremost among them, he is the best triple jumper in the world.

But the talents and interests of the 30-year-old Chicago native range far and wide from the TJ runways of the world:

•He is a professional trainer of police and attack dogs, including Rottweilers, Dobermans and German shepherds.

•He also trains his dogs to compete in schützhund, the most demanding level of pursuit, attack and protection dog training in the country.

•He is a second-degree black belt in tae-kwan-do. He considered trying for the Atlanta Olympics in the martial art, but had to abandon the idea when he realized training for the two sports would take away too much from his banner event, the TJ.

•He is a deputy sheriff for Washington County, which includes his home, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

•He is a volunteer coach at his alma mater, perennial college powerhouse Arkansas.

Conley says he wants to be considered a serious practitioner of whatever area he happens to be appearing in at a given moment. He will never be taken lightly in the triple jump: Olympic and world champion; indoor WR holder and two-time global champ; the leading combo long/triple jumper of all-time with his bests of 27-8 (8.43) and 58-7½ (17.87); winner of virtually every honor open to him.

Except one: the outdoor World Record. But Conley always welcomes challenges in his various lives. So until he claims the WR, Conley remains—to the almost certain chagrin of the rest of the world's three-bounce exponents—a driven man:

T&FN: After Barcelona and Stuttgart, you have the titles you always were shooting for. So is the outdoor WR now the one big goal remaining for you?

Conley: That's it. The Worlds and Olympics were the two wins I was really shooting for. It's not that the last two years might have been my last chances for them, but you've got to take your opportunities when you can.

Now I can concentrate on the World Record—which is going to be different, because I've never jumped specifically for a record before. I don't know how to train for it, actually. So it should be an interesting year next year.

T&FN: Can any athlete really plan for a record? Or is it that you plan to be ready to take advantage of the opportunities?

Conley: That's what I'm going to train for. I know I'm capable of a World Record, so I'll concentrate on getting my body ready for peak performance time and training myself to take advantage of it when it happens. I know it can happen if I prepare right.

Before, I thought about just one meet. No

matter what else happened during a season, I thought only about the Olympics, or the Worlds. But now I want to take advantage of the opportunity for a record, whenever it comes.

T&FN: You now have won those major titles and you're the best combination long/triple jumper ever. But being the longest TJer, period, is very important?

Conley: I suppose I could say that I've had some bad luck in not getting the WR, but it's been good luck too. If I had gotten the WR, what would I do then? I might not have anything to shoot for.

There's always been something left for me to go after and that has kept me in the sport this long. I've been around quite a long time, as far as rankings go. And I've been fortunate never to have an injury serious enough to keep me from being ranked. So it's been good to have those goals to shoot for.

T&FN: You have accomplished so much in your career, but can you single out one achievement that has meant the most to you?

Conley: It probably would have to be a combination of the indoor WR and the Olympics. With the indoor record, it was because I hadn't won many—or any—meets up to then. I'd been told, "You're getting old. You're not training right. You have too many distractions."

Of course, the Games were like a cap to a career. I could look back to '88 and '84, when things didn't go my way. And at the time I did the jump in Barcelona [a mark negated by a 2.1 wind], I thought it was a record. I didn't learn for maybe five minutes that it wasn't a WR. So that was going through me.

T&FN: Was it also pleasing to win in Stuttgart just a quarter-inch off your PR?

Conley: Oh man, yeah! The only thing that wasn't so positive about Stuttgart was that I didn't leave feeling I'd gotten my best jump possible. I feel I could have jumped farther. If my first jump had been fair instead of a foul, then I think very good things could have followed. I could have gone on and tried to jump farther when I was fresher.

T&FN: You've said you want to get everything out of your body so you can look back and have no regrets. Would the outdoor WR be "everything"? What factors could influence you being able to do that?

Conley: Yes, the record would be everything, absolutely. But I won't change anything in terms of training—except I will have to get my body ready to jump a lot.

That means I'll have to get some slight



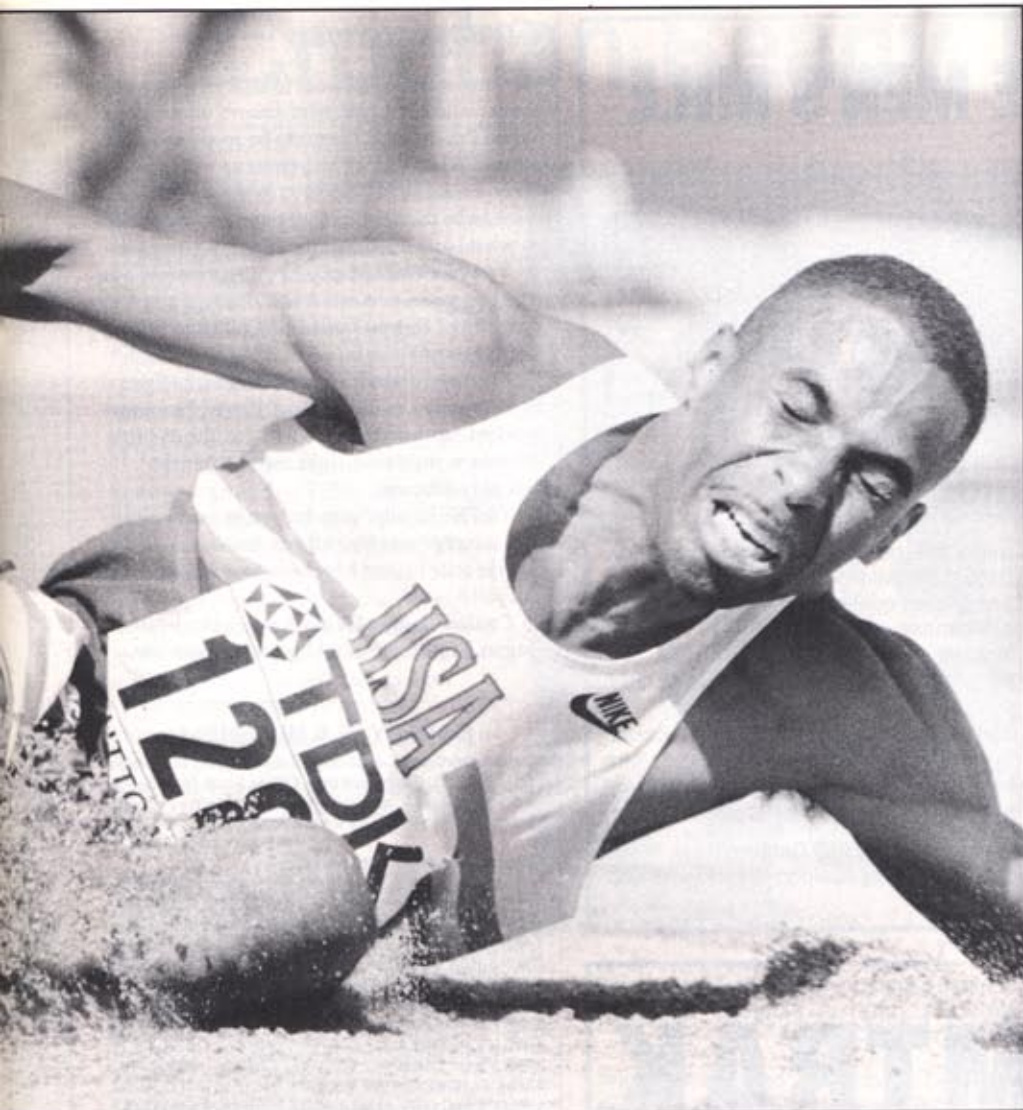
injuries indoors so I can work through them, get scar tissue built up and then get healthy. With my body used to taking trauma, I can then jump all the time. This past year, my body was ready to jump far maybe only once every three weeks.

T&FN: How have you stayed at the top for so long in an event that is so physically demanding on ankles, knees and legs?

Conley: Even in college when people asked me my goal for a year, I always said, "Stay healthy." I've always known that if Mike Conley stays healthy, then he will do good things. The really hard part is, in order to get ready to break a record or to win the Olympics or Worlds, you've got to take your body right to the peak of its fitness.

But by getting close to that peak, on the way down you can have a bad injury. Yet if you don't reach that peak, you may not get the record or the win. So there is a very fine line there, especially in training.

That's when it becomes really hard: if you don't take yourself past, if you don't work hard, whatever you want isn't going to happen. But if you go too far and get injured, it



Horsmuller

been your incredible ability to come through for the win on your last jump—often the last jump of the competition. Yet you had both Barcelona and Stuttgart won after just three rounds. Was that anything conscious, or did they just happen that way?

Conley: I went out both times to jump far early. For me there's nothing more frustrating than to get to the end of the competition, even if I've got it won, but have things go wrong. It's my sixth jump and I think, "I've got it figured out," but I foul. That's when I want to ask the official, "Just one more jump!"

So my goal in both Barcelona and Stuttgart was get far out there early, then just try to improve on each jump. But I also have the mental problem that I love to compete so much. Without the true competition, it's difficult for me.

I've been trying to overcome that by trying to jump farther in the beginning. But when I do that, the competition can be gone. Then I have a hard time with no adrenaline. I need that adrenaline, but I don't get it.

T&FN: What might be behind Mike Conley reaching the very top in the TJ at this time? You were among the elite at a younger age, but is the event so technical that it has taken you this long to really learn it?

Conley: [laughs] I've probably just outlasted everybody. Really, I think experience is a big factor. That's one good thing about the triple jump: no one just pops up and takes over. You see 'em coming—unlike the sprints, say, where a year or two goes by and somebody new is at the top.

As far as training goes, as you get older... well, I call it "avoidance behavior." I see it in dogs too. You usually avoid the things you're the worst at, but do the things you're best at. That's how people get old and don't improve. The things I hate to do are the things I've tried to emphasize in the last few years. That has helped a lot.

T&FN: You're the best in the world in your event... but something else you do is work as a deputy sheriff in Fayetteville. What in the world is the best triple jumper doing in a dangerous job like that?

Conley: I do all kinds of crazy things around here. Like 20 minutes before we started talking, I was out in a field, having a 130lb. dog run at me at about 40mph, hit me at waist level and bite my arm. I've got padding on the arm but he's hitting me at full speed and I've got to catch him. And he isn't even in sports!

The sheriff's work started because of training police dogs. I felt I had to see what was out there; what I was trying to adapt the dogs to. First I was a constable, then I became a deputy sheriff of Washington County. I just enjoy it—I enjoy fast, dangerous things.

But I also feel so much satisfaction both in helping people and also in catching the bad guy. I once sat for five hours on a stakeout when we were trying to catch a rapist. We did it and there was as much satisfaction in that as in winning the World Championships in the triple jump.

A thing about me, though, is when I'm

won't happen either. Neither one is right.

T&FN: How does an athlete as experienced as you walk that tightrope? Is it knowing yourself instinctively because of that experience?

Conley: I really think that's what it takes. It's funny—and some people may not follow the comparison—but it's the exact same thing in dog training. I can train my dogs but in order to get to that very highest level, there's always the possibility I'll break them. They'll shut down and not do anything.

But to get them to the point of winning, you've got to take them there. Then once you get them there, you've got to know how to walk that fine line. Same thing with athletes—me, anyway.

T&FN: There are drills you do which enable you to predict what you'll jump in competition. What are they and how do they help your predictions?

Conley: I'll be honest: I've done so well on those drills, I'm almost scared to talk about them. You hop twice, step twice and then jump into the sand. I think it was devised in eastern Europe and uses a series of ratings for jumps.

You're supposed to go about two feet over

your PR, and it's usually pretty close. It's supposed to measure your optimum triple jump if you hit everything perfectly—although that hardly ever happens.

But in the past couple of years, I've gotten up to 63 feet. I could hardly believe it. I'd been around 61-feet when I knew I was competing just super. But I came back and started doing 63s and even a few 64s.

Also in 1993, I benefited from the work I did in the Olympic year. It wasn't anything to go out and bound 1500m with a weight vest on. Go up and down football fields; 100m of bounding. Do 80m bounding for distance.

T&FN: If you do 63-feet in this drill and take 2 feet off that, you're at 61. You've also said that 18.50—60-8^{1/2}—is possible. So the numbers are in the ballpark. Is that an ultimate distance for you, or do you even want to limit yourself?

Conley: I'd be really happy with 61-feet, but I hate to limit myself. By doing that, I think 18m [59-3/4] would become a kind of barrier. And it shouldn't be. My focus next year will be just to hit the end of the pit, anywhere I jump. Wherever I land, I land.

T&FN: One of your most exciting traits has



THE MEN'S MILE

This is the first booklet in a new series, The Evolution of Track & Field World Records, by Alphonse Juilland. *The Men's Mile* offers a small treasure chest of information on the evaluation of world records in the men's mile. It lists all the records from 1913 on, shows the distances between each record (e.g., Jim Ryun—3:51.1—would have finished more than 36 yards behind Steve Cram's 1985 record), charts percentage improvements, velocity, and

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Conley Interview — cont:

working with dogs, I want to be known as a dog trainer and a person who knows about dogs. When I'm in track, I want to be respected as an athlete. When I'm out on a street arresting somebody, I want to be respected as a police officer. I want to be the best in all of them and respected as what I am at a particular time.

T&FN: Considering your TJ successes of the past two years, how much longer might you keep competing? Do you want to defend your titles in Göteborg and Atlanta?

Conley: I'll definitely be in Atlanta. I want to be really, really strong there. I'm more worked up for Atlanta than for the Worlds. Atlanta is my focus right now. After that, I'll just play it by ear.

T&FN: Finally, your last quote in our Stuttgart coverage was that all you had left to do was pick the color of your Mercedes. So, what color did you pick?

Conley: [laughs] A black one; a black station wagon. I figured I should get a car I can use.

CONLEY IN A NUTSHELL

Michael Alex Conley was born October 5, 1962, in Chicago, and is 6-1/170. Graduated from Luther South High School in Chicago in '81, and competed for Arkansas '82-'85. Currently represents Nike International.

Major Meets: 200—2)NCAA ('85).

LJ—2)US Junior ('81); 8)NC In, 2)NCAA, 6)USA ('82); 5) USA In, 6)NC In, 2)NCAA, 3)USA, 3)OF, 3)WC ('83); 3)USA In, 1)NC In, 1)NCAA, 7)OT ('84); 1)US In, 1)NC In, 1)NCAA, 1)USA, 1)OF, 1)WCp ('85); 1)USA In, 2)USA ('86); 6)USA In, 3)USA, 8)WC ('87); 2)USA, 5)OT ('88); 2)USA In ('89); 9) USA In, 4)OT ('92); 7)USA ('93).

TJ—1)US Junior ('81); 4)NC In, 13q)NCAA, 5)USA, 2)OF ('82); 2)USA In, 1)NC In, 2)NCAA, 2)USA, 2)WUG, 4)WC ('83); 2)USA In, 1)NC In, 1)NCAA, 1)USA, 1)OT, 2)OG ('84); 1)USA In, 1)NC In, 1)NCAA, 2)USA ('85); 1)USA In, 2)USA, 1)OF ('86); 1)USA In, 1)WIC, 1)USA, 1)PAG, 2)WC ('87); 1) USA, 4)OT ('88); 1)USA In, 1)USA, 1)WCp ('89); 2)USA ('90); 2)USA, 3)WC ('91); 1)USA In, 2)OT, 1)OG ('92); 1)USA, 1) WC ('93).

PRs (all-time notations in parentheses): 100—10.36 ('86); 200—20.21 ('85); LJ—27-8/8.43 (15, x W; =8, x A) ('85); TJ—58-7 1/2/17.87 (6, 6 W; 3, 3 A) ('87). Indoors: LJ—27-3 1/4/ 8.31 (7, x W; 5, x A) ('86); TJ—58-3 1/4/17.76 WR ('87).

Rankings (world, then U.S.):

LJ: '82—x, 6; '83—4, 4; '84—x, 5; '85—2, 2; '86—4, 3; '87—7, 4; '88—6, 5; '89—5, 4; '90—nr; '91—nr; '92—8, 6.

TJ: '82—x, 5; '83—4, 2; '84—1, 1; '85—2, 2; '86—1, 1; '87—2, 1; '88—5, 1; '89—1, 1; '90—3, 2; '91—3, 2; '92—1, 1.

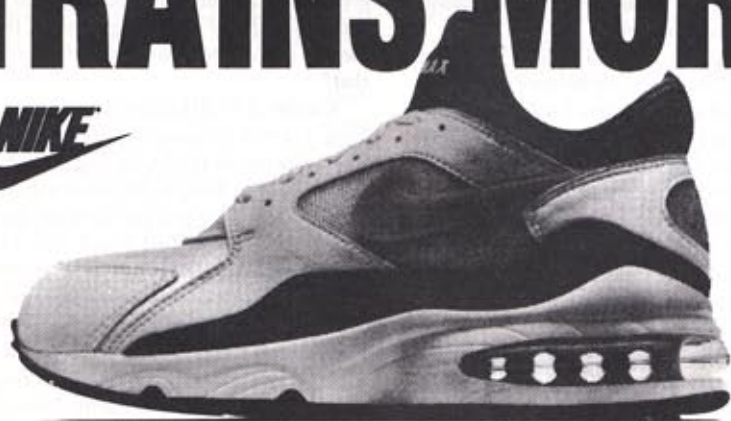
Progression:

Year	Age	Long Jump	Triple Jump
1978	15	19-2 5.84	42-8 13.00
1979	16	23-5 7.13	45-11 13.99

1980	17	22-5 1/2 6.84	49-7 1/4 15.13
1981	18	24-5 3/4 7.46	51-10 15.80
1982	19	26-10 1/2 8.19(A)	55-9 1/4 17.01
1983	20	27-2 8.28	56-6 1/2 17.23
1984	21	26-11 1/2 8.21	57-5 17.50
1985	22	27-8 8.43	58-1 1/4 17.71
1986	23	27-4 8.33	58- 1/2 17.69
1987	24	27-3 3/4 8.32	58-7 1/2 17.87
1988	25	27-0 8.23	57-8 1/2 17.59
1989	26	26-9 8.15	57-11 17.65

1990	27	—	57-7 1/2 17.56
1991	28	26-2 1/4 7.98	57-9 1/4 17.62
1992	29	27-4 1/2 8.34	58-1 1/4 17.72
1993	30	26-9 1/4 8.16	58-7 1/4 17.86

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