

WILLIE BANKS

In scanning back issues for previous conversations we've had with triple jump World Record holder Willie Banks, one can trace the development and maturation of an athlete's philosophy of competition.

November 1980's *T&FN Interview* found Banks, then a 24-year-old UCLA law student, describing a time of athletic self-discovery. Track & field, he was learning, was "not just athletics" but "part of being Willie Banks."

In October 1986, Banks talked of a desire to be the first jumper past 18 meters (59-3/4) and of a plan to put all his eggs in one basket, the quest for a gold medal in Seoul.

These themes still weave through his musings. Now married to '85 TAC 800 runner-up Louise Romo and father to 8-month-old Erin Nicole, an exuberant Banks shared his thoughts with us after popping two historic jumps to win the Trials:

Banks: The day before I jumped, I was ready to rock and roll. . . That whole week I would be looking around at people doing what they were doing, thinking, "I'm getting ready to become extinct and these people don't even know that the Olympic Trials are happening."

There are people who are worried about eating, and I'm worried about getting on the damn Olympic team.

T&FN: What if you hadn't made the team?

Banks: If I didn't make the team, I was going to retire, just walk away from it. I was facing extinction, and I think the primal nature of Man in me was coming to the fore because I was trying to preserve my life in sport. There's such a thing as fight or flight. And I had to fight or I was going to retire: flight.

T&FN: Now that you've proven you're not extinct, what do you want to accomplish this year?

Banks: I want to win the gold medal at the Olympics. I don't care if I don't jump far anywhere else. If I'm only jumping 53-feet at the Olympics, I want to be standing at the top of that podium looking out at these people and just [voice dropping to a nearly inaudible whisper] go for it.

T&FN: Your seasonal record going

into the Trials was as solid as anybody's, but weren't you surprised--after down years in '86 and '87--to produce the farthest jumps in history?

Banks: I wasn't surprised with the first one because I had dreamed it. The Saturday before the meet, I was at practice and I had a good runthrough, and I just packed up my stuff. I said, "I'm ready."

I went home and I didn't do another thing until the meet because I didn't want to practice anything that might take my mind away from that perfection.

I saw me doing 18 meters [59-3/4] in my mind. I just saw it so clearly. And I kept trying to conjure up that thought over and over. I knew if I could be confident in that imagery, when I got to the top of the runway at the meet I could do it.

T&FN: How does that work?

Banks: My brain was being programmed even though my body wasn't, and my brain was going to take over when I got to the top of the runway. It's unique what the brain can do if you let it do its job; just relax and let it go.

I went to the meet, and I looked at the pit and the pit looked real short. Where they had the measuring sign for the World Record, it looked real short, like, "All I have to do is just get up off the board and I'm going to be halfway to the World Record." That's how I felt.

T&FN: Does it upset you that the two 18m jumps were wind-aided?

Banks: Yeah, I was upset. But at the time I was happy. I thought, "Shoot, I'll take it," because I was still the first person to go 18m.

That's what I wanted. I told people in 1985 that I wanted to be the first person to go 18m. I thought that Bulgarian [Khristo Markov] was going to get it, though. Man, I was like, "No! The Bulgarian's gonna get it!"

T&FN: Well, you'll probably see Markov, Protzenko and the whole cast of characters in Seoul. Are you worried

about them spoiling your shot at a gold?

Banks: Not really, because I consider track & field to be a self-inflicting problem, not a problem with anybody else. If you're doing the triple jump or something like that. If you're competing in a race, that's different, because then you've got to beat somebody.

All I'm doing is competing with elements. If I do what I have to do without worrying about anybody else, then I'm going to win. Because there's no one in the whole world who's ever jumped that far. If they jump to 18.20, I'm not going to get scared because I've already done that. I know how to do it.

That's why when I jumped 18.06, if it had been me sitting back there and somebody else walking out of the pit, I would have jumped up and said, "We're getting ready to take this sucker to the Moon! Because I'm going with you. I'm not going to get left behind on Earth."

T&FN: But they didn't?

It's ridiculous, but it looked like everybody was thinking, "Well, somebody's on the team. Now let's see who else is going to make it." That wouldn't have been me. I'd have been like, "Come on. Let's go. Let's turn up the heat."

T&FN: Like Carl Lewis did to retake the Trials long jump lead from Larry Myricks during that downpour?

Banks: That's what I'm talking about. That's what people should have done; just like Carl did. When somebody's turning up the heat, you've got to turn it up even higher. I love that. That's the kind of stuff that makes for good competitions.

T&FN: You've had a problem with an ankle the past two seasons. Can we assume from the way you jumped at the Trials that that injury isn't bothering you now?

Banks: This year, everything just came around at the right time. I've been working with my physical therapist, Bob Forster, for six months trying to get my ankle together and my foot together, but I still had a few nagging things.

Then Bob's associate, Craig Nelson, came along with this new technique in massage and massaged the pain out of



my ankle so I was able to finally use it in my run and use it in my jump.

T&FN: *Didn't you ever worry that your 32-year-old body might never regain its athletic prime?*

Banks: I had times when I thought, "Gee, I'm not going to make it." But I wasn't going to stop. There were too many people around me who had faced adversity and survived.

I remember when Craig was working on my leg before the meet and one of my old teammates, Kim Gallagher, was there. We were talking.

I said, "Man, Kim, I don't know about this. I don't know what I'm going to do." And I said, "How do you feel?"

She said, "You know, Willie, it's funny. I can't see myself *not* being on that Olympic team. I just can't."

I thought about that, and I thought, "You know what? She's right. She's exactly right." That's the frame of mind I think you have to have. You've got to be myopic.

T&FN: *There have been a number of truly tough performances in these Trials.*

Banks: That women's 3000, that is what it's about. You give it all, and it's who will not die before the tape. And I'm not talking about dying and just stopping. I'm talking about dying, falling on the ground and just not being able to move anymore.

That's what it should be about. That's competition. That's hairy stuff there. □

William Augustus Banks III was born March 11, 1956 at Travis Air Force Base, California, and is 6-3/170. Graduated from Oceanside High School ('74) and UCLA ('78). He now competes for the Mazda Track Club.

The outdoor World Record holder in the triple jump, he has set 5 outdoor ARs and two indoor ARs after an AJR 55-1 as a UCLA frosh (still 2, 2 AJ). As a long jumper, he was ranked among the top 10 in the U.S. 3 times: 9th in '75; 8th in '77; 9th in '81.

His progression (with World and U.S. triple jump Rankings in parentheses):

Yr	Age	LJ	IJ	Major Meets
'71	15	20-0	---	
'72	16	23-4 1/2	---	
'73	17	23-11	49-3 1/4	
'74	18	24-1 1/4	51-3	
'75	19	25-11 1/2	55-1 (x, 8)	10)JNC
'76	20	25-8 1/2	54-8 (x, 4)	4)JNC, 3)TAC, 4)OT
'77	21	25-10 1/2	55-4 1/2 (5, 2)	2)JNC
'78	22	25-2 1/2	55-11 1/4 (x, 3)	2)JNC
'79	23	---	56-6 1/4 (5, 2)	2)TAC, 2)PAG, 5)WCP
'80	24	25-10 1/4	56-2 3/4 (2, 1)	1)TAC, 1)OT
'81	25	26-7 1/4	57-7 1/2 (1, 1)	3)TAC, 1)WCP
'82	26	25-10 3/4	57-1 1/2 (5, 1)	3)TAC
'83	27	---	56-7 1/2 (2, 1)	1)TAC, 2)JWC
'84	28	---	57-3/4 (6, 3)	3)OT, 6)OG
'85	29	26-5 3/4	58-11 1/2 (1, 1)	1)TAC, 2)OF, 1)WCP
'86	30	24-5	57-8 1/4(A) (8, 3)	3)TAC, 4)OF
'87	31	---	57-4 3/4 (7, 2)	2)TAC, 2)PAG, 19)JWC
'88	32	---	56-3 3/4	2)TAC, 1)OT

by SIEG LINDSTROM