

# Reese Hoffa

by Jon Hendershott

One day, Reese Hoffa's life will make a great movie—adopted at age 5; became a state champion shot putter in high school; reunited with his birth mother when he was in college after searching on the Internet; growing into a world-class thrower who won U.S. and world titles and ranked No. 1 in the world; now an advocate for adoption.

Now 35, the Athens, Georgia, resident claimed the Olympic bronze medal in London, a high point in a career that still continues:

**T&FN:** After winning a medal in your third Olympics, have you been able to decide yet where that bronze ranks in your long list of honors?

**Hoffa:** I would have to put it pretty high up there, only because it is so difficult to get it right on that day.

A factor most people don't realize is that when you're doing a regular competition like the Pre Classic, there is a rhythm you get into.

You're not being asked to stop for a lot of races at Pre like at the Games. So there is a rhythm to what's going on that's very hard to overcome at the Olympics, even if it is your third time there.

**T&FN:** You said last spring that London might be your last chance to win an Olympic medal. Do you still feel that was your last Games, or have you revised that outlook somewhat?

**Hoffa:** Well, honestly I'm looking towards the kids that my wife Renata and I might have. If we don't have kids by 2016—or are about to have some—then I would consider going for the Rio Olympics.

But whenever we do have kids, I want to make sure to watch them grow from the moment they are born until they head off to

college. That's a priority for me and it's what I really want to do.

**T&FN:** In your long career, you've been a presence in U.S. putting since you got 6<sup>th</sup> in the '00 Trials. Other than it being your job, what factors have contributed to your longevity?

**Hoffa:** I've got to think it's great coaching. I think me and Don Babbitt have had a kind of evolution in how we do things. He has allowed me to grow as a shot putter every year.

When we started out, he did everything: write the workouts; be there to tell me what to do in lifting or throwing. He is a lot more reserved now because, in essence, I've got my PhD in throwing. He has allowed me to grow as an athlete to be able to figure out what I need to do, especially at my age now.

**T&FN:** Is that one of the major lessons you learned in the sport, to manage on your own?

**Hoffa:** Yes, absolutely. I think that's why, in some small way, I've had a bit of a resurgence in performance over the last couple of years. Definitely, '10 was a transition year. I was very up and down, even though I ranked No. 2 in the world. The reason I did that was, by the end of the season, I finally got it in terms of how I needed to approach training.

I was in my 30s and you can't train like a 20-year-old when you're 35. It was tough: I think I was lifting weights too much and not working enough on technique. So I struggled, but still ranked where I did.

Then by gaining that knowledge, I came back in the '11 season and did exceptionally well—and that also contributed to my '12 performances.

**T&FN:** You also have said you learned not to beat up your body so much as you got older. So that was another factor in the whole process?

**Hoffa:** Absolutely. My body knows how to throw far. It's just giving it the opportunity to do so. Not beating myself up—not thinking, "I have to squat 600

## Hoffa In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Michael Reese Hoffa was born (as Maurice Antawn Chism) on October 8, 1977, in Louisville, Kentucky; adopted by the Hoffa family at age 5; 6-0/325 (1.83/147)

•**Schools:** Lakeside-Evans HS (Augusta, Georgia) '97; Georgia '01; now represents the New York AC & Nike.

•**PR:** 73-7/8 (22.43) '07 (10, x W; 6, x US)

•**Coaches:** David Machovec (HS), Don Babbitt (Georgia, professional)

•**Major Meets:** SP—11)NC '98; 1)NC, 8)US '99; 2)NCi, 4)NC, 6)OT '00; 7)NCi, 3)NC, 6)US '01; 6)USi, 6)US '02; 5)USi, 2)US, 1)PAG, dnq)WC '03; 2)USi, 2)WCi, 2)OT, dnq)OG '04; 2)USi, 5)US '05; 1)USi, 1)WCi, 2)US '06; 2)USi, 1)US, 1)WC '07; 2)USi, 2)WCi, 1)OT, 7)OG '08; 3)US, 4)WC '09; 4)USi, 2)US '10; 3)US, 5)WC '11; 1)USi, 4)WCi, 1)OT, 3)OG '12

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** x, 5 '00; x, 6 '01; x, 7 '02; 8, 4 '03; 6, 3 '04; 4, 3 '05; 1, 1 '06; 1, 1 '07; 3, 2 '08; 3, 2 '09; 2, 2 '10; 3, 2 '11; ?, ? '12

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pounds in sets of 5," but just being content with doing 460 for a set of 5. And still know that I'm going to be as strong and powerful as I need to be, so it really doesn't matter.

I really think that's what I have learned over time, especially as I get older: to cut out the fat in my training regimen and get down to the meat of it. The essential things you need to do if you're going to make the ball go far.

*T&FN: All the world's best putters meet frequently each season—which you have said you like but hate at the same time.*

**Hoffa:** The reason I like it is because we have a constant competition. When you're in an environment where you're the best person by 10-feet, there's really no reason to improve. In the U.S., we are pretty much very close—but we're close and throwing far. So we push each other every single time. Every time I meet Christian Cantwell or Ryan Whiting or Adam Nelson or Cory Martin, I know that I have to be prepared to throw far.

The bad part is you can never have an off meet. We go after each other every time we compete. It takes a lot of energy to go out there and throw far every time.

*T&FN: You and the other throwers really respond to meets held in places like downtown Lawrence, Kansas, or the Zürich train station.*

**Hoffa:** I personally love any meet that showcases the shot put and that's what those kinds of competitions do. The fans do get into it. They love to watch us throw; they love it when we're out there screaming, giving them high-fives. I love to be able to do that; to touch the people in the stands. In Zürich, we threw t-shirts into the crowd. Or after a long throw, you high-five people, which tells them, "Yeah, we did it!"

*T&FN: On the personal side, you're very open about having been adopted.*

**Hoffa:** I was put up for adoption at age 4 and adopted at 5. My birth mom had my brother Lamont when she was 14 and me when she was 16, so she was still in high school and dealing with two kids. She struggled with that for three years but to her credit, she decided it wasn't the life or place where she wanted to raise her kids. So she put us up for adoption.

At the time I was pretty devastated and hurt. I thought, "I can't believe she would do that. Why doesn't my mom want me?"

As you get older and start seeing all the things that you gained from it, I'm incredibly thankful that she made that decision for me. It gave me an opportunity to be exposed to a different life.

*T&FN: You are an advocate now for adoption and the positive life changes of it for kids.*

**Hoffa:** That's 100% right. I've been working with Adopt Together, which is a non-profit that raises money for adoption costs, and also Covenant Care, which is an adoption organization in Georgia. I did a National Adoption Day event in Washington, D.C.

There are a lot of good kids looking to be adopted because all they want is an opportunity to show that even if they came from a family situation that may not have been very good, once given the chance they can really show



## Reese Hoffa — continued:

what they can do.

I always wanted to make sure I was pleasing my parents, especially when I was adopted, because I could easily have been raised in an orphanage for 18 years. But the family had a place in their hearts that they wanted to give this kid a chance to grow up in their family. I just loved making them proud.

**T&FN:** *Has your life story been a great source of motivation for you, both in track and in general?*

**Hoffa:** It has been. Growing up and finding myself in a new environment, I could have easily gone into a shell and thought, "Woe is me. No one wants me."

But I would be lying to myself because my family did everything they possibly could to show me that wasn't the case. There *were* people who wanted me. I hate to think I wouldn't have had that opportunity if it weren't for my adoption.

**T&FN:** *"Reese" actually is short for Maurice, your original birth first name?*

**Hoffa:** My parents didn't want me to be named Maurice, so they said, "We'll call you Reese." But they didn't want it as my first name and what did I think it should be. You ask a 5-year-old something like that and they always go back to what they know and that's TV.

At the time, my favorite show was *Knight Rider* and the main character was Michael Knight. So I said Michael and I became Michael Reese Hoffa.

**T&FN:** *Do you have any distance goals, or are you more looking to maintain your consistency?*

**Hoffa:** I feel like I have accomplished pretty much everything I could ever imagine. To have 114 throws over 21 meters [68-10¾]... I always just wanted to equal John Godina at 84. Now being just 5 behind Christian's 119, well, attempting to beat his kind of consistency can take you to the next level of performance.

### "The Unknown Shot Putter"

*Reese Hoffa likes to have fun, in life generally and especially in putting. First, he became an ace Rubik's Cube solver. Then there was "The Unknown Shot Putter." Can throwing in a bear suit be far behind?*

"I got into the cube in college. I used it to keep calm and help me focus. My fastest time for solving one is 39 seconds in a cubing competition. I've never got into the second round, so that's a goal of mine. The humbling thing is when an 8-year-old little boy is way better than you.

"The Unknown Shot Putter came about when the organizers of the Home Depot meet in '03 wanted to promote the meet. Don Babbitt and I

I would love to be able to do that. If I could have 22 victories like he had in '10, I would love that, too.

But also by the end of my career, I would love to hold a World Record. Just to say I've done it. For me that would be the icing on top, considering how hard I have trained. Hopefully, if people can see that it's possible to do it clean, then it will inspire another generation

of Georgia; my sponsors at Nike, New Balance and the New York AC.

They all could have said, "You make it to the Olympics, but then you don't do anything." But they know it's tough to get those medals but they stood behind me.

But in terms of just overall sheer joy and amazement, probably my most satisfying performance ever was, coincidentally, at the

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**Hoffa recognized the value of promotion early in his career**

to go for it.

**T&FN:** *Is it possible for you to differentiate between winning your Olympic medal and the single most satisfying performance in your career? Or are they one and the same?*

**Hoffa:** I think there are different kinds of emotion when you get into it. The Olympic bronze was an affirmation of all the hard work I've put in over the last 12 years as a professional athlete.

And it also represents all the people who helped get me there: Don Babbitt; my high school coach David Machovec; the University

came up with the idea and they loved it.

"I trained for about two weeks wearing a wrestling mask, to get my peripheral vision adjusted to it. You use your peripheral vision in putting so I had to make sure the eyeholes were big enough and didn't block my vision.

"My wild dream is to one day be brought into a meet in a cage wearing a bear suit. I would really have to train seriously in the suit to get used to having paws on my feet and hands. I would need two suits, one to train in and one to compete in.

"It all goes back to wanting to have fun in the sport and entertain the fans too. Why be stuffy? You can show fans that the shot is an incredible event, it's fun and they should pay attention to it."

London GP in '07. Christian took the lead on his last throw but I thought, "I just have to put it on the line. If I foul, at least I know I went down swinging."

So I hit a big one and I saw it kind of float just a little bit farther than usual. I thought, "I hope it's enough."

Then it came up at 22.43 [his 73-7¼ PR] and I just couldn't believe it. I'd done a 22-meter throw in practice, but never in a meet. It's been hard ever since to duplicate that feeling. It was just pure exhilaration and happiness at having done something like that.

**T&FN:** *Might that be at least one reason why you haven't PR'd since '07? It's been so hard to recapture that special of a feeling that you just can't call up on every throw?*

**Hoffa:** That could definitely be it. I'm working on it and I'm hoping I'll once again be put in that position. Maybe that's what it will take to break the World Record.

I can come in there in great shape and have the confidence I can do it. Just think, "I'm going to just try to throw as far as I can," and the ball goes a mile. It just takes training and I'm still working on it. □