

BOB COFFMAN

T&FN INTERVIEW by DAVID GLEASON

Of the three decathletes who have ever scored 8000 points 4 times in one season, two are well-known Olympic champions—Bill Toomey, who bettered that mark 7 times in '69, and Bruce Jenner, who turned the trick 4 times in 1975.

The third is a tall, 28-year-old Texan named Bob Coffman. A 13.9 hurdler for Southern Cal back in '72, Coffman turned to the decathlon in '73 and took 5th in the NCAA the following year with a PR of 7623. He has been a decathlete ever since.

The following 3 years did not show significant improvement, however, as Coffman completed 11 more 10-eventers but only managed a 27-point improvement over his NCAA mark.

But Coffman can be a rather single-minded individual. He began training with Tom Tellez (who came to Houston in '76) and finally started to catch fire with a 7992 score in December '77. He won 1978's USOC Sports Festival with 8137 (hand), but even that gave little indication of what was to come in '79.

This year began, ironically, with a Texas Relays loss to Tito Steiner, but Coffman has been unstoppable since, running up impressive wins at the AAU, the Pan-Am Games (where he avenged his loss to Steiner), and finally an outstanding 8274 PR at the U.S.-USSR-Canada tri in August.

His marks this season include world decathlon records for 100m (10.38) and the hurdles (13.91). Coffman has suddenly become one of the world's top decathletes.

Naturally, my first question to the rather intense, softly-drawling native of Houston dealt with his breakthrough after 10 years of endeavor:

T&FN: What has turned a consistent 7500-point decathlete into a consistent 8000-plus decathlete?

Coffman: I work with Coach Tellez here in Houston, and he and I have been working on consistency. We go over each event, over and over, doing drills hundreds of times. Lots of throws in the shot and discus, especially during the off-season. Not so much in the jumping events, because that takes too much out of your legs.

T&FN: How does that improve your performance?

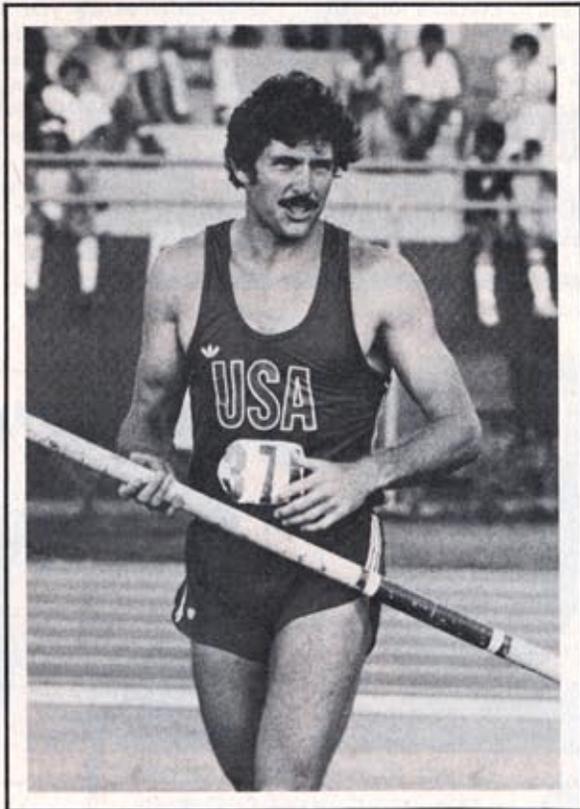
Coffman: Well, when you make a mistake in competition, you can correct it then and there.

Coach Tellez has broken down each event into simple little steps; when I get into trouble during a meet, I can go back 32—November 1979

and find out what I'm doing wrong, and then do it right on the next throw or jump. He's given me a new point of view on the decathlon that way.

T&FN: This year you had victories at the AAU, the Pan-Am Games and the U.S.-USSR; all big wins, but it seems the Quebec City win against the Russians might have been something like a turning point.

Coffman: Yeah, that meet was a turning point. Winning the AAU was great,



Diana Johnson

and winning the Pan-Ams was great, because the decathlon got a lot of publicity out of it; plus I did, too.

But as far as self-confidence goes, as far as experience, my inner self, I believe that winning the Quebec City meet was more important. But only a decathlete would understand that.

T&FN: Can you explain?

Coffman: It showed me that even with a relatively bad 100m—I like to get off a good 100, and my 10.71 there isn't all that fast—but I still showed that I could score big. And I lost about 75 points on a bad javelin call, on a fair throw that got

called flat. I got the throw over, but it would have been a PR by 12 feet.

I had some good PRs, in the hurdles, the discus was a good PR, my total was a PR, and there are still an easy, easy 200-300 points I can pick up just with what I have now.

If I could put everything together and have a really good meet, I could have an 8700-point decathlon. But again, it's a matter of putting everything together at one time.

T&FN: Is it possible to put that many PRs together in one day?

Coffman: Sure, it's possible. The guy I beat by only 5 points at the AAU, John Crist—he got PRs in 8 of 10 events. He improved on some marks by wide margins, like 11 feet in the discus. It's just a matter of doing well, plus having a lot of luck.

It's nice to have PRs all the time, but you can't always do that. You've got to be, again, consistent. You can't count on a PR. I can't run 10.38 every time like I did at the AAU; but I ran 10.61 at San Juan, and 10.71 at Quebec City, and those are still good marks.

T&FN: Do you feel that decathletes are treated like the second-class citizens of track?

Coffman: Well, we have our own AAU governing body, and the Texas Relays still has the decathlon on Wednesday and Thursday.

You know, it's nice having the track all to yourself, lots of room and all—but you could tell Cleburne Price that he could have the decathlon during his meet on Saturday and Sunday, and the meet would only run about 30 minutes longer than it does now.

[Sighs] It would just be nice to have someone besides your wife and the officials there during a decathlon, that's all.

T&FN: So your wife goes to your meets?

Coffman: Oh, yeah, my wife Barbra is one of those people, you know, behind the scenes. I couldn't continue without her. She comes to all the meets and sits through my decathlons.

T&FN: That must give you a lot of support.

Coffman: It does. She's a violinist with the Houston Symphony, one of the

first violins.

I don't really enjoy that kind of music. I'm born and raised in Houston. I'm a country and western man, but I go to her concerts. I figure that she sits through my decathlons, so I can sit through her concerts.

It's very important to Barbra just as far as her existence goes. It's her outlet to play the violin in the back bedroom for 2-3 hours every night.

She doesn't have the decathlon, she has the violin. So I go to her concerts.

T&FN: *It's been said that you're thought to have a lot of self-confidence; perhaps too much. Is that accurate?*

Coffman: What I would say to that is, where is there room for me to be cocky? There are guys out there scoring more points than I am.

Sure, you're on cloud nine and running on vinegar when you win 3 meets like I did this year. I had some pretty good marks and some pretty good scores, this, that and the other.

And so when somebody comes up to you after the 1500, when you just got a PR by 100 points like at Quebec, what are you supposed to say? I can't reason with someone like I'm doing with you now.

I think every athlete, after winning a major competition, is cocky for a while. But there are some athletes who stay cocky; and if you do that, somebody's going to come up behind you when you don't expect it and bash you in the head. And they'll pass you up real quick.

That's one thing about Coach Tellez; he keeps you in your place.

T&FN: *How do you mean, "in your place?"*

Coffman: We'll come back from a trip, say from Quebec City, and he'll ask, "How was Quebec City?"

And I'll answer, "Oh, it was real nice, it's a nice place to live, I think." [Laughs]

And he tells me, "Look, I know that, I've been there. What did you mess up on in the decathlon?"

So I'll start going through things, and he'll say, "That's no good, you lost points! You've got to work on that."

We can joke around and have fun together, but when it comes to the decathlon, he's serious about everything. And that keeps me, in particular, in line. And I think that's good.

T&FN: *Can you say how getting into the decathlon has changed your life?*

Coffman: Well, I can say that as a post-graduate, whereas some of my buddies from high school are sitting behind desks getting pot bellies, it's sure changed my life that way.

It's also affected my life to the point where we aren't what you would call financially secure. My wife teaches school, and hasn't been able to pursue her field, which is graphic design, because a graphic designer doesn't get paid beans to start.

You get notoriety out of it, people ask you to do things for them; they're

always inviting you places. And that's nice.

But the issue's not through until after the Olympic Games next year. I'm trying to keep everything in that perspective.

And when I have people coming to me, some company, wanting to set something up for later, that's fine; but I say wait until after next year. I'll do the Texas Relays, Olympic Trials, and hopefully, the Olympic Games, but that's it.

T&FN: *Are you looking forward to doing something else besides the decathlon?*

Coffman: Oh, definitely. One thing we're going to do—I don't know how, but we're going to do it—is go snow skiing next year. I met my wife skiing in Sun Valley, Idaho...

I don't think I'd break my leg, but I could twist an ankle and lose a couple of weeks training. So that's one of the first things we're going to do when this is all over. Take a vacation week in Zermatt, Switzerland for Christmas. We've been planning on that for about three years.

And I'm looking forward to getting into, well, whatever. I have my own ideas, but I'd rather not say.

But I'm not the kind of person who can sit behind a desk. I refuse to wear a tie. I'm not that kind of person; I just don't like to do things like that.

T&FN: *Any thoughts on what will happen at Moscow?*

Coffman: Well, I've told people

before, you really can't say. For example, at the AAU this year, nobody in the United States, not even Frank Zarnowski, thought that John Crist would score better than 4th or 5th place. Nobody but John, that is. He had a personal record by 400 points.

And you know, anybody can do that if they just happen to be hot one day. As for the Olympics, people do things there that they've never done before, and will never do again.

Everybody will be there, but anybody who has done well in the past, anybody who is over 8000 points going into the Games is going to be somebody to contend with.

I'm certainly not putting myself at the top of the list by any means. There are guys who I've outscored that I'll put ahead of myself, just to keep myself in line. Because anything could happen. Guido Kratschmer could score 8900 points if he puts it all together. I'd just like to make the team, and then see what happens. □

Bob Coffman was born February 17, 1951 in Houston, Texas; 6-3/203.

Year	Age	Affiliation	HH	Decathlon
1970	19	Lamar HS	13.9, 37.2	
1971	20	Sn Cal	14.0	
1972	21	Sn Cal	13.9	
1973	22	Sn Cal		7183h
1974	23	Sn Cal		7623h
1975	24	Tobias		7449h
1976	25	Tobias		7650h
1977	26	Hurricanes		7992h
1978	27	Hurricanes		8137h(A)
1979	28	Hurricanes		8274

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