

Adam Nelson

One of the fiercest competitors ever seen, the sorta-retired Olympic shot champ is now bringing his fire to helping improve the lot of his fellow athletes

by Sieg Lindstrom

PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE/GETTY IMAGES

Olympic gold medalist—albeit with his moment atop the podium at Olympia in '04 denied by a doping cheat—World Championships gold medalist.

Essentially, there was no major shot put title Adam Nelson didn't win in his career, 15 of its years at the world-class level. World Junior, NCAA for Dartmouth, the USATF crown 4 times.

At 40, three years after retirement, Nelson still owns the world's No. 10 all-time mark.

You may see Nelson in a circle again, actually.

He wants the Masters World Record (see sidebar), but his life in Georgia—as an MBA married with two kids—centers around running the Athens Orthopedic Clinic's Sports Performance & Rehabilitation Center, coaching youth throwers and the fight for athletes' rights as President of the Track & Field Athletes Association (TFAA).

After some retrenchment and refocusing, the TFAA is poised for reinvigorated public engagement (see p. 16). Seemed like a good moment to touch base with Nelson.

T&FN: As we near press time Nick Symmonds, like you a campaigner for athletes, may be barred from Team USA at the World Championships in Beijing for refusal to sign away his responsibility to his shoe sponsor to wear their gear when he's not on the track. Thoughts on that?

Nelson: The fact of the matter is that every single athlete that makes the national team for this World Championships this year—if they're

not with one of USATF's sponsors—is going to have to sign a code of conduct that will violate their current sponsorship contract, if they have one. There's no alignment at all between what's good for the athletes and what's good for the federations.

I applaud USATF's effort to expand and build upon the national team brand; they need to do that, but as they do that's going to create

A Return To Competition?

Rumor has it that since Adam Nelson turned 40 in July he has been eyeing a return to competition and the Masters World Record.

He explains: "About a month and a half before my birthday I started training a little bit more and found it doesn't feel that bad. I checked and saw the Masters Record is only 21.41 [70-3]. That's not too far off what I think I'm capable of doing.

"I've always needed a purpose and a goal to train. I'm not one of those people who just enjoys training for the sake of training; I love to work out but I like to have a focus to it.

"The big thing here is that there are so many other people in my situation—whether it's late-30s or 40s or 50s or 60s—who think their life is limited to whatever their jobs focus them on, and I still think there's an opportunity to be strong and fit and healthy at 40.

"So I figured I'd start off by breaking the World Record for 40-year-olds and—I suppose stranger things have happened—if I find myself in July of next year in

pretty good shape I might just make the trip up to [the Olympic Trials] and see what happens."

The Masters WR he's targeting was set by Brian Oldfield in '85. "It's a pretty legit throw," says Nelson. "21.41 is no joke."

The oracle of Facebook says Nelson, whose last real meet was the '12 Trials, threw a 15lb (6.8kg) shot 70-2¼ (21.39) in practice in July. Will there be a large differential in throwing the 16-pounder?

"Not once I get into a little better shape," he says. "I could realistically expect about a 20.80 [68-3] throw if I were throwing the 16 right now and hitting it right.

"When I was in shape, even as late as 2013 before I decided to retire, what I would throw with the 15 in practice was pretty close to what I could throw when I really hit the 16. So it was almost a direct translation."

Asked for the timing on this, Nelson explains, "I reentered the testing pool in May and so I can't compete in a sanctioned event, technically, until November.

"I did that because if I'm going to go for something that's 70-3, that's great for a Masters competition but it's pretty good for a regular competition too."

conflict with the athletes and their sponsors.

It's already happened. Just this summer in Monaco you had a B-team in the 4x1 that couldn't race because they had athletes that weren't sponsored by a USATF sponsor; their sponsors didn't want to let them run in gear from another company.

That's in the best interest of that company and you can't be critical of that sponsor. What you can be critical of is that the rules have continued to expand in a way that knowingly creates this conflict.

They've played this game of chicken for a long time and now the guys are starting to call each other on it. I think it's a cause for caution and I hope that the athletes are aware enough of what's going on to understand that this has nothing to do with any one sponsor as much as the structure of the sponsorships that USATF builds.

USATF should not have a sponsorship program where the majority of those revenues come from one or two of the main sponsors for the sport unless they have already hammered out an agreement that says, "This is what the federation sponsorship looks like and this is what the athlete sponsorships are going to look like."

And even then I caution against having one predominant sponsor that sponsors the federation and the sport because that means we're all drinking from the same well. That's just not good.

T&FN: USATF would probably suggest that athletes should take up any objections they have with USATF's Athletes Advisory Committee.

Nelson: That doesn't work. All of the volunteers on the AAC at every level are great people, they have great opinions, but they are not empowered to hold USATF accountable.

USATF can negotiate a deal with the AAC and then turn around 6 months later and change their mind and not have any repercussions.

People say, "Well, that won't happen." It has happened. It has happened in the past, it will happen in the future because the business interest of USATF will change from year to year, and the AAC cannot hold USATF legally accountable to any agreement it makes because the AAC is a part of the federation.

This happens all the time in major companies. They say, "The marketing budget for this year is \$2 million," then they get 6 months down the road, things get a little tighter and they bump the budget down to \$1 million.

Nelson In A Nutshell

- Personal:** Adam McCright Nelson was born July 7, 1975, in Atlanta, Georgia; 5-11¼/254 (181/115)
- Schools:** Lovett HS, Atlanta '93; Dartmouth '97.
- PRs:** 73-10¼/22.51 (10W, 6A), 73-6/22.40i (3W, 2A)
- Major Medals:** 1)USAJ, 1)WJ '94; 1)NC '97; 3)US '98; 1)OT, 2)OG '00; 2)US, 2)WC '01; 1)US, 2) WC '03; 1)OT, 1)OG '04; 2) US, 1)WC '05; 1)US '06; 3)US, 2)WC '07; 3) OT '08; 3)US '10; 1)US '11
- World/U.S. Rankings:** '97-x, 9; '98-9, 4; '99-x, 6; '00-1, 1; '01-2, 2; '02-1, 1; '03-3, 1; '04-2, 2; '05-1, 1; '06-5, 3; '07-2, 2; '08-4, 3; '09-5, 3; '10-6, 3; '11-7, 4

You know what the marketing director has to do? Deal with it. That's exactly what has happened with the AAC in the past on more than one occasion.

But it's not just a problem with USATF. It's a problem with the IOC and IAAF, too, and I would say the farther up the chain you get, the worse it actually is.

Our AAC puts in a real concerted effort, but they're not really intended to deal with those types of subjects. They're meant to deal with safety issues, minimum standards, national team needs—not the professional side of the sport.

T&FN: You and the TFAA bit off a bit more than you could chew in the last few years in that the athletes as a group seem unconvinced that they need a "players' association." Obviously, you intend to continue making the case.

Nelson: We [the TFAA] are looking to really leverage social media to draw more attention to this because there's still no communication at all between the federation and the athletes. The communications that you get are usually mandates and it's not conversational.

That's a real problem when the athletes aren't willing to stand together and start having collective conversations on the direction that they want.

Everybody in the sport—and I don't care if you're with USATF and supporting their initiatives or a meet director or an athlete—you know that there are some issues with sport's structure. And we can't advance in a way that benefits athletes if the athletes don't get involved in the conversation.

I think it's fantastic that USATF has a projected \$40 million in revenue for next year alone. My question is how many dollars are going to trickle down to the athletes. And not trickle down to the athletes but actually be given to the athletes?

We've all talked about collective bargaining and that is something that the TFAA is not currently in a position as an organization to do, but this is the stuff that people want. You really want to go in and say, "Hey, USATF, you're going to be held to the same standard that the NFL Players Association holds the NFL to."

I think we've got between \$6 and 10 million total that comes to the athletes through USATF. If USATF is trying to take over the profession and expand the national team brand to do so, they're really failing to meet the expectations of a profession.



Among other things, Nelson is now happy family man

For athlete professions, the benchmark is within 10 or 15% either side of 45%. Thus you need to understand that the athletes are expecting to see a revenue figure that comes in close to \$20 million a year. That's the starting point, period. And if we're not there, that's fine but we're just not going to race in the races that you want.

That's what we'd love to be able to say, that's what we as athletes need to do. And we're not there yet, but I will say that while what you're signing may sound good because we're all desperate for scraps, the organization you're negotiating with isn't the USATF of 20 years ago.

It doesn't have a \$5-10 million budget, it's projecting a \$40 million budget, and you don't want to lock yourself into a deal that allows them to do anything they want.

Five or 10 years down the road if they're blowing out expectations and hitting \$60 million it looks awful. That's why you hire experts and set up contracts that are legally enforceable. And that's not being done.

T&FN: Certainly USATF's leadership converses with some athletes. One or two of those athletes spoke on stage at the '14 Annual Meeting in support of

the current direction.

Nelson: They certainly talk to the athletes that they like to talk to, but those athletes are only getting one side of the story and it's not a robust story. I've heard it time and time again: "There are a lot of things we can't share with you."

Well, why not? "It's confidential." Well, if the athletes are going to make an informed decision, they have to have that information. It again comes back to trust.

T&FN: USATF CEO Max Siegel has asked for the AAC's input in defining a "professional athlete" for purposes of revenue-sharing. Do you think that's a good-faith effort?

Nelson: I'm going to be honest about this. I've known about it since the initial conversation and I've offered for the TFAA to pay for a lawyer to review any such agreement, and we've been told that Max and Stephanie Hightower and others have said there's no need to get any lawyers involved. Our offers have been rebuffed.

My understanding is that the dollar amount in question is \$1.8 million per year. It may have gone up; I'm not in the loop anymore on that. But I think that any potential negotiation that locks you into 4 or 5 years at \$1.8 million a year, while it sounds great, if you take a step back and look at the bigger picture it sucks.

T&FN: That's \$1.8 million to be divided how?

Nelson: I don't know but it doesn't matter.

If you're projecting \$40 million in revenue next year alone, that's less than 10%. Then they like to say, "This doesn't include the USOC athlete funding." Well, let's not confuse things.

This is what a car dealer does to you: "We're going to give you a great deal on the trade-in,"

on meet presentation, the structure and length of meets, etc.

Nelson: Yes, I think that the athletes also have to lead change in the business model of track & field. I don't have the answers there; that's well beyond my station. But I will say

Nelson's indoor PR still finds him No. 3 on the all-time world list



ERIK ANDERSON/THE SPORTING IMAGE

and then we're going to screw you on this other thing, let's just keep those two things separate.

The USOC money is good, we don't need to talk about that. We need to talk about the \$40 million they have coming in now.

T&FN: There is a consensus in most quarters of the sport that intelligent brainstorming is needed

the model for a track & field meet doesn't work from a business standpoint.

People ask, Why do people go to track & field at the Olympics? Is it because it's track & field or because it's the Olympics? Why do people go to Zürich? Because it's a track & field meet or because it's just a really cool sporting event in Zürich?

There's a handful of examples that show the model can be successful but there's a million examples that show that it doesn't work. We have to have a conversation about what direction we want the sport to go in.

Quite frankly, right now I'm really worried that because the primary sponsor pool for us is driven completely by the running-shoe market—a huge, huge market—that we're going to have an ever-larger bias towards just distance-based professional events and the other events will get lost in the mix.

I can make a very compelling argument for why the sponsors would do that from their business perspectives; I'm not faulting them. I just want to make sure that these conversations happen so that if we really care about track & field as an entity, we can be sure that some version of the sport as a whole is still here for future generations.

I think that one thing is really clear: There are a lot of people that are very, very passionate about this sport. Not just specific events, but about the whole sport.

What we need to do is find a viable business model for track & field that works outside of the Olympic cycle. □

Advice For The U.S. Squad

American shot putters have won 7 of the last 10 World Champs. We asked Adam Nelson about that legacy and for his advice to yearly world leader Joe Kovacs and the 4-deep U.S. squad as they head to Beijing to try to unseat two-time champion David Storl of Germany.

Nelson credits John Godina, who won the WC titles in '95, '97 and '01 with starting the current U.S. momentum in the shot circle. He explains:

John had no connection to drugs, no positive drug tests. I think that really set a precedent on how to do it right.

You'll see that a lot of the younger guys, starting with Reese Hoffa and now Joe Kovacs, they were 2 or 3 years out of college before they really started hitting the international level. I don't think they would have had that opportunity had a guy like John not had such a long, productive and drug-free career.

He was followed by me and others that created this new model that said you don't have to be a drugged-up athlete to compete.

I think we also established in '99 and 2000 and 2001 that not only is our event pretty entertaining, it can really dominate a whole track meet when we have great performances.

I always go back to the 2000 Olympic Trials when we nearly froze the whole meet because the crowd wouldn't be quiet because the competition

was so phenomenal.

I think when we had that and the same core of people with one changing every other year or so for so long, we were able to build a culture or brand following of shot putters. I think these guys now are benefiting from it.

My advice to Joe Kovacs and all the throwers is you can't control what happens outside the circle. Develop a game plan. The way they structure the warmups and then the process through the track to the competition field really doesn't give any field eventer a really strong opportunity for a great performance.

You warm up, you go sit down for basically an hour and 15 minutes, you don't get a chance to move around a whole lot. If you do, it's not on a circle. There's not an opportunity to take more than two warmup throws.

So practice that now, go out and do a morning qualifier and evening final, practice the game plan. And then going back to my first point, the only thing you can control is what's inside the circle.

Make sure when you get in the circle that you own the circle and that you dictate how you're going to enter and leave that circle because once the shot leaves your hand you can't do anything about it.

If you own the circle, trust me, you'll own the competition. Any event I ever competed in where I really felt the circle was mine, nobody could beat me.