

Interview with TOM PETRANOFF

Long & Strong goes half-way around the world to present our visitors with some much needed (and too often neglected here) javelin talk. With us is Tom Petranoff, former World Record Holder! Tom is a citizen of South Africa, but was born in the U.S. Tom had a very lengthy and successful career and has much to share with our readers, so lets get it on!

Long & Strong: Tom, can you run through your throwing career for our visitors? I know there's a lot to tell!

Tom Petranoff: I was a baseball and football player and had just come back from baseball practice at Palomar Jr. College in San Marcos, California, in the spring of 1977. I saw a fellow throwing the javelin, who just happened to be the best junior thrower in the country. I asked him if he could teach me to throw and he told me to get lost! I then found another fellow to show me how to throw! At that time the coach came out for the school team and told me that club throwers were not allowed to be practicing at that time. I told him I was not a club thrower and that it was my first time out! He asked me my name and would I please come out for the school team. The next day, my first meet, I threw 66.90m (219') in a pair of baseball shoes. Two weeks later I threw 70m. The fellow that would not show me how to throw was a French Canadian by the name of Luke Lapperier! He told me that I was lucky, but that I wouldn't throw any further. Since then, my motto has been, "You can't, you won't and you never will." Six weeks later, I threw 77.50m (254') which was the leading throw for a junior at the time. I then went on to throw 79.64 at a junior invitational meet (USA VS Russia). I of course beat his best throw and was considered the best junior thrower in the world! To say that Luke Lapperier was devastated is an understatement, as I don't think he ever competed again! In early 1979, I moved to California State Northridge to train under Bill Webb. Also training there was Bob Roggy, who at the time was the top senior thrower in the country. In that year I progressed to 80m on April 12th, but came in second to Bob Roggy, who again told me that I couldn't throw any further. Again I was up against, "you can't, you won't and you never will." I knew after that meet, that I had the ability to become a world class javelin thrower and more than that I had the will! 1980 was Olympic year and the Olympic Trials were held in Eugene, Oregon. I threw 82.74, which believe it or not tied for third place. Duncan Atwood, won third place because his 2nd best throw was further than mine. After this meet I was asked to join the United States Olympic Committee Elite Athletes Program. I was provided with the tools necessary to participate with the best in the world. Our program consisted of not only coaching, but biomechanical filming and analysis, but also mental and medical information which proved to be a major part of my success. Juris Terauds who provided the biomechanical film information, predicted that I would throw 100 meters. At the time it was difficult for me to believe! In 1981, I just continued to work hard and put all the information that I had learned together to become a more all-around javelin thrower. In 1982, I had a best of 88.40 and was ranked 9th in the world, which was my first world ranking.

Then 1983 started off with a bang! I knew early in the year that I was in top form. I went to Australia in January and threw an Australian record of 90m or 294ft which was then 2nd to Bob Roggy's all-time US record of 315 feet. On May 15th, 1983 at the UCLA Pepsi Invitational, under the best coaching in the world by Bill Webb, javelin support and technology by Dick Held, and metal preparation of Bob Nideffer, I went on to set my first world record of 327ft 2 inches, or 99m72. It turned my world upside down! I certainly knew I had the ability, but to actually accomplish that distance was a real dream come true. It was definitely a team effort, everyone from my coach to my wife has to be thanked for the all out effort that was generated. In July of 83 at the Coliseum in Los Angeles, I competed in a dual meet between the US and East Germany. I beat Detlef Michael with a throw of 310ft 4 inch to his 302ft, which was at the time the longest losing throw in history. I had a great year with many throw's over 300 ft. The first world championships in Helsinki, Finland, where Detlef Michael beat me in the pouring rain

with a throw of 295 to my 282, was a big disappointment to me. After a super year, they actually placed Michael first in the Track and Field News world rankings above me, which I felt was totally unfair. In early 1984 Uwe Hohn from East Germany threw the javelin 104m, which surpassed my world record, but also prompted the change in the javelin that we now know as the current javelin. I was predicted to be the favorite to win the 1984 Olympics, having won the qualifying round with a throw of 86m. My only real memory of the Los Angeles Olympics, was standing on the runway! I looked up and saw myself on the big screen at the track! That was the beginning of my downfall. I did not produce a throw long enough to entitle me to compete with the final 8 throwers. Arto Harkenin won that Olympics with a throw of 85m something. The irony is, if I could have only had my qualifying throw, I could have won that Olympics.

Back to the javelin change! By changing the center of gravity on the javelin, it allowed the difference in the weight distribution to make the javelin turn over sooner, which shortened the distance and actually allowed the javelin to stick in the ground, which virtually eliminated flat throws! In 1986, I set my second world record of 85.38m, which I did at the World Games in Helsinki, Finland (There is no better place to set a world record)! I did receive my status of #1 in the world, according to Track and Field News that year! Attaining world rankings again in 1987, which was my 6th year in a row, I proceeded onto the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Again I performed poorly and had decided to go on a Rebel tour to South Africa! I was disillusioned with sport in the US, needed the extra money being offered and felt it unfair that South Africa, through political reasons, could not compete with the rest of the world. In 1980, the US team couldn't compete in Russia, in 1984 at Los Angeles, the East did not compete, for political reasons. I truly believed this was wrong in sport. I had decided that I would be a pawn in the political field of athletes and show that it was wrong to mix athletics with sports. This competition gave me world wide coverage on the sports pages, but also provided me with a ban from the TAC (The Athletics Congress) of 6 years. Funny enough, Ben Johnson had just been involved in the biggest drug scandal in Olympic History, by testing positive for steroids in Seoul and only received a 2 year ban. Zola Budd was allowed to compete in Los Angeles because her grandfather held a British passport! It just goes to show you how they bend the rules, which is often totally unethical. To ban just one country in the world, because of the countries political beliefs, not the individuals beliefs, seems totally barbarian to me. Iraq, Iran, Libya and even China are involved in human rights violations, much equal or worse than South Africa, but yet they are allowed to compete in the international arena. With that behind me, I decided I wasn't ready to give up javelin throwing and I enjoyed support from the public. At that time athletics was one of the three major televised events on TV. South Africa was a sport mad country and due to the sanctions, they were very interested in international athletes. I then moved my family to South Africa in March of 1989. My spirit and rejuvenation was totally focused as I was receiving recognition, like never before. When I first came here, people said that I was washed up and was on my last pay day. I was out to prove them wrong. In 1990, I threw 85.40 on April 8th, which was not only a African record, but also a American record. At that time I was banned, so it was not recognized by the US. I was recognized by Track and Field News who then decided to rank me 7th. I was duly impressed! Then 1991 was a great year, as I set several African and American records with the best throw of 89.16. Later in the year I went on to become a South African citizen, but it was not early enough to allow my throw of 89. to be recognized as a South African Record. In 1992 South Africa was let back into the international arena and I had a throw of 87.26, which is now the South African record! In 1992 due to problems with unity within the old and new governing athletics bodies, I was in the unfortunate position of being used as a political pawn and was unable to compete in the Olympics. Two weeks before the games in Helsinki, Finland, I threw 86.90, which would have been a silver medal at those Olympics. What is the saying "C'est La Vie"? By this time, I was sick and tired of all the politics that were involved in sport and decided to concentrate all my efforts on development. I then retired in 1992.

In 1990, I started working in the disadvantaged townships teaching the javelin throw to youngsters. It didn't take me long to realize that it was a very difficult event that was very dangerous as well as expensive in areas that didn't have the proper infrastructure. I then designed a childrens training javelin called the Turbo Jav. Now 7 years later, 5 molds later and a lot of money, time, and research, I have developed the perfect training implement for any class of javelin thrower. After my fourth mold, I was not happy with the quality, so I took it to an engineer who works for one of the world's most acclaimed missile making companies. Together we designed the Turbo Jav which is as aerodynamic as a real javelin, is

safe and is cost effective. We have now implemented this javelin into all primary schools in South Africa as a official event in all track meets. Australian Little Athletics has also implemented the TurboJav as a official event, and Finland junior schools used the Turbo Jav as an official training impliment. We are also currently **working with several other countries to use the Turbo Jav in their athletic programs as well.**

L&S: What would you consider the highlight of your career?

TP: There is no question that my greatest accomplishment in my life was my first world record of 327.2 at the Pepsi Invitational meet at UCLA on May 15, 1993.

L&S: SWhich of your peers did you admire most, and why? Who was your greatest rival?

TP: Of all my peers in the javelin community, Bob Roggy was definitely the person that I admired the most. Bob Roggy was a great athlete, was the first person to throw over 300 ft and finally break the American record held my Mark Murrow of 300 feet, which stood for 10 years. Bob Roggy was killed in a freak accident in 1986 in Houston, Texas at the first Olympic Sports Festival. My greatest rival was without doubt Detlef Michael, who took the status of the first World Champion in 1983.

L&S: What were the key elements of your javelin technique?

TP: I believe the key elements in my javelin technique were numerous! At the time of my first world record, they said that I was lucky, but I went on to show them that they were wrong. My agility, power, natural ability, and follow through were important, but my pull was long and my block leg was consistent, which was for sure my greatest asset!

L&S: In an event where arm problems are common place, you had a relatively long career as an elite thrower. Would you attribute this to anything in particular?

TS: I definitely think it is due to not putting pressure on the elbow, but allowing the lower body to do the work and letting it happen, instead of forcing it. Your arm action, should be a reaction that is not intiated by thought, but happens as a result of a good block and lift, which then allows you to get the stretch reflex to the shoulder and arm necessary to throw long distances. When you try to use your arm or muscle a throw, it creates a negative result as well as damages the elbow.

L&S: Can you outline your what you're weight training plan was, off-season and in? How much weight could you handle in your primary lifts? How tall are you and what weight did you compete at?

TP: Weight Training Out of Season: OctoberConditioning, which consists of general excercises, 10-12 repetitions, November. bench presses, pullovers, squats, back jerks, cleans and snatches !st week: 5 X 5 repetition at 80%, 1 rep maximum2nd week: 5 X 5 repetition at 70% Monday, 80% Wednesday and 70% Friday3rd week: Pyramid lifting, 1,2,3,4,5 - 5,4,3,2,1 90% maximum weight at 1rep.4th week: Testing, consisting of 5,4,3,2,1 warm up, 1 maximum rep., (5 at 50%, 4 at 60%, 3 at 70% 2 at 80% and 1 at 90% and 1 at yourpersonal maximum) You should test 2-3 lifts per day during this testingweek, so that you can achieve your best results. Do not due your testing of all lifts on one day!

December, January and February- 3 times a week, You should allow yourself 1 1/2hrs to 2 hours per session! Concentrate on power and technique! You must be technically correct to get the most out of the lift! In February of '83, my lifts were as follows (1 rep): pullovers: 220lbs, bench press: 350lbs, squats (front)- 220lbs, (back)- 575lbs, back jerks- 360lbs, cleans -340lbs, snatches -220lbs.

Pre-season Lifting: March-April: backing off to lifting 2 times a week, but maintaining strenght levels at 70/80% per week on all lifts. May/June: twice a week, 60/90%. July-September: no lifting I am 6ft 1inch and my ultimate competing weight is 215lbs.

L&S: Other than the weights, what other types of training did you use?

L&S: I feel that plyometrics (jumping drills -hurdles, stair jumping etc., triple jump and long jump drills) , short explosive running (test your self at 30-50m sprints X 10), stair climbing (x 10-15 per session) ,hose drags, which is a garden hose about 5m long connected to a weight of 5-10 kilos. The object of this exercise is to run and let your throwing arm draw back slowly and smoothly as if running away from the javelin while working your left arm as a piston, providing you with the rythmn and drive to attack the throw. Never pull your arm forward, it should always stay back over your shoulder. 10-15 runs per session and then generally increase the weight asthe exercise becomes easier. Of all my drills, hose drags are the most important in providing the essential feeling of attacking the throw in the right position.

L&S: In the latter stages of your career, you emigrated to South Africa. Am I correct that you still make your home there? Ever have any regrets about the move?

TP: My home is still South Africa. I have no regrets as I still believe every athlete should have the right to participate for their country, no matter their countries political beliefs! Although we compete for our country and we are proud to do so, our ultimate goal is to be the best at what ever our particular dicipline is! To realize our talent, to work hard , to commit ourselves, to be the best, is truly the ultimate goal, but to recieve world records, gold medals and praise is just the icing on the cake!

L&S: Aside from shorter throws, how did the change in javelins (what year was that?) impact the event?

TP: In 1986 the javelin change came into effect! By changing the balance,it had a impact on the release angle. It went from being a floating javelin, which flew well into a modest wind to a javelin that flew further with a tail wind. The angle of release was decreased, so to get optimum flights, you had to throw at a slightly negative angle of attack. At first they said, because of my technique, which was delivering the javelin at a positive angle of attack, would not be conducive to throwing the new javelin. To compensate for this, I tried the fork grip, which up until this time, I did not believe in, but it did help. I am the only former World Record Holder to hold a world record with the old and the new javelin. At first we thought this change would elimiate long throw's altogether, but after 10 years and looking at the current world reocrd of 98mby Jan Zelezny it show's you that javelin throwers and javelin manufacturers have adapted to the rule change. What is next????????????????????

L&S: Any words of advice to younger athletes just getting started with the javelin?

TP: Definitely! The javelin throw is one of the oldest and most technically unique events in the history of the Olympics. It is considered the premiere event in the throws. Often the javelin throw is overlooked at school and club level because of the safety aspects! Any young javelin thrower can try my new training javelin, The Turbo Jav, which is not only safe but also cost effective and learn the basics of the javelin throw. If you can't throw theTurbo Jav, you can't throw the real thing! I am one of the very few, but very fortunate people that has experienced sport at an elite level for many years. The experiences and the rewards are the ultimate satisfaction! My advise to any up and coming thrower is to go for it! Give it your all! Never be afraid to ask for help or advise. There are many athletes such as myself that would love nothing better than to give back to the sport. The javelin throw is the greatest throwing event in all of sports! It takes technique, strength, ability and a strong mind to succeed! Is it really any different than every day life?

Tom has a wealth of experience and we're glad that he's gracious enough to share it with others. Tom makes himself available through e-mail. Thanks Tom!!!