

THAT'S A PEACH, HUN!

Fock 2: Tribulations at the Trials

The Atlanta hotel we graced with our presence for the Trials that summer was right across the street from the Olympic Stadium, which, of course, has since been converted into Turner Field, the Braves' baseball park. Being in such close proximity to the track venue, we found ourselves walking the halls with several of America's best athletes. They seem larger than life on the track, so it's cool to see them up close. Some seem remarkably small, especially the distance folk.

But even the biggest USA track icon of the era, Michael Johnson, proved to be smaller than I thought. It was a day or two before he would be running the 200 Meter Dash Final, the very last race of the 10-day Trials experience. He had already won the 400 in dominating fashion, and was looking sharp as tacks in the deuce. His Olympic goal was the 400/200 double gold, which had never been done by a man, but his immediate goal was Pietro Mennea's long-standing World Record for the half-lapper, which had withstood all challenges for 24 years, but which looked to be within Superman's reach. Certainly nothing on the track seemed to be in his way. But I almost laid him low.

A few members of our OT96 tour group were jauntily walking down the hall, having just returned from a typically liquid lunch, and looking forward to a late afternoon and evening of good track action. I was at the front of the group, and glancing back over my shoulder as we walked and joked. Beer awaited us in the room, so we were walking with eagerness.

Just as we reached the corner where we would turn 90° right to get to the elevators, another group stepped briskly around from the elevator hallway. Both groups reached the corner at the same instant, and both came to an abrupt halt. The guys in the back walked right up the butts of the guys in front of them, but the frontmen of each group stopped on a dime, and stood about 12" from chest to chest. One was me, the other was Michael Johnson.

MJ was dressed nicely: collarless beige shirt, thin gold chain around his dark neck. On the track, he looked jacked, but here, as an ordinary guy a foot in front of me, he looked damn ordinary. He looked fit, to be sure, but maybe it was his eye level being at my chin that made me think, "Damn, Michael, you small!" I didn't say that, of course.

After the instant of recognition, and the reflexive "Pardon me," that I would give to anyone, I stepped back deferentially, with an outstretched arm to ease my cohorts aside, and said, "Go get that 200 record, Michael."

He smiled a bit, said "Thanks," and led his entourage onward. A couple of days later, we (among others) cheered him on as he broke that 200 Meter World Record by 6/100ths of a second.

But how different might things have been with one more step in that hallway? Suppose either he or I had been just that much less attentive and we had actually collided at that corner. Suppose our legs banged together with a perfect patella-on-patella impact, bruising tendons, smushing ACL's, and clipping menisci? Suppose MJ went down, knee blasted, Olympic dreams dashed?

I would've been branded as the ultimate evil in the world of Track & Field. Fans the world over would curse my carelessness and scorn me. At the Stadium, fans would shun me as a pariah. They would point at me and hurl invectives: *That's him! There's the BASTARD that hurt Johnson! Fuck you, ASSHOLE!!!*

They would also hurl trash at me, and factions would cheer when a crumpled cup would hit me in the head. My friends would banish me from their presence lest they be similarly judged, and for fear of off-target projectiles.

There would be lawsuits. My face would be on dartboards. And Frankie Fredericks, a non-American (though schooled at BYU), would have won the Olympic 200 and bettered Mennea's mark.

One step would have changed so much.

So, my quick reactions saved Michael Johnson's career. Because of my panther quick reflexes, MJ went on to the greatest moments of his career.

Maybe he knew all that instinctively when he said "Thanks."

That was my closest accidental encounter with a famous athlete. The next closest had come in Montreal many years earlier. A group of six of us had parked the Roadhouse on some dark side street, and were walking up to Rue St. Catherine for a spirited night of bad French and good beer.

As we neared the glow of the well-lit boulevard, a tall silhouette rounded the corner. It was a woman, dark-skinned, slender, with long dark hair, and wearing a black evening gown. She had to be at least 6'3" tall. Beside her, emerged a much taller figure. He came into view with majestic slowness, and it seemed to take forever for him to fully appear. He towered over her. I felt my neck bending back as I looked up and up to see where this skyscraper of a man would end. His shoulders seemed as wide as a bus. He wore a long black cape over formal attire. He had another woman under his other arm, just as tall and elegant as the first. I had never – and have never since – seen such a huge human being. It was Wilt Chamberlain, one of the greatest (and largest) pro basketball players of all time.

We stopped in our tracks and looked at the trio in awe. At least, most of us were in awe. Kim, one of our group, seemed totally unruffled. "Hi Wilt," he said casually and cheerfully as The Stilt and his ladies passed by. Wilt offered no reply, but was nice enough to not step on us as he walked on into the night.

Well, whatever. But if all that knee-crash-MJ-out blatherskite *had* happened in Atlanta, I could have been confident that nobody in the Stadium would have been throwing apples at me. Security was making sure that Olympic Stadium was a No Apple Zone.

Give some people a uniform and they get way too into themselves. Stadium Security were doing their best Gestapo imitation all week. It was infuriating. Daytime temperatures were reaching 100°, humidity was 80%, and the Stadium announcer kept reminding people to drink plenty of water. But the catch was, you had to BUY the water from them! For FOUR DOLLARS a bottle!!

Everyone's bag was searched at the gate, and "unapproved" items were removed. Fans who had paid top dollar for tickets were being deprived of their personal belongings. Well-prepared spectators who had brought water bottles in anticipation of the harsh summer conditions found themselves being told to leave them at the gate, or bring them back where they came from. Most of these people were not staying right across the street, like we were, so they really had no choice but to abandon the harmless plastic containers. A box next to the turnstile was filled to overflowing with such items

Ed had an apple in his bag. An apple. An innocent, solitary apple. A healthy snack for later, to serve as an alternative to the hot dogs, nachos, popcorn, and puppyshit fondue that was being peddled at various concession stands.

The apple, though, was deemed illicit and dangerous, and it was confiscated.

It had nothing to do with security. That was a load of crap. No one was going to throw a plastic water bottle at anybody. Nobody was going to heave an apple into the steeplechase pit. We were all pure track fans, there to see the greatest pure track meet on earth. There was no international terrorism threat here; everyone was American!

But, in the genuine American Way, this was pure, unmitigated, undisguised greed. Take away their food and drink, and they have to give us MONEY. Constant P.A. announcements about drinking water just made the issue more and more incensing.

Absurdly anal ushers just added to the negativity of the experience. One time, we were one section over from our good, high-priced seats. That section was empty. I showed my ticket to the idle usher, and began to walk through the empty 20-seat row to get to my seat. The usher turned into Herman Goehring on me, and forced me to walk down the ramp, under the stands for one section, and back up the other ramp. She had her hand on her walkie-talkie and threatened me with immediate ejection if I did not comply.

I glared at her, then smiled most insincerely and said, "Whatever you say, Madame Swastika," and blew her a little kiss as I walked by.

When I emerged from the next tunnel, I made a sharp barking noise, and when she looked over to see where the damn dog was, I stuck my middle finger up my nose, smiled, and proceeded to my seat. Very mature, huh? She deserved worse.

It's terrible, though. All the great athletic performances of that week – including Michael Johnson's thanks-to-you-Rick World Record – and my most prominent memories of the week are the asshole Stadium Security people. With every shred of due respect, they totally sucked diseased frog balls. And I hope they read this. Heads of pure shit, one and all.

It was such a 180° contrast to the previous Trials, in New Orleans in 1992, where we could roam Tad Gormley Stadium at will with nothing but friendly eyes all around. Our seats happened to be about 100 feet from a beer stand, and ice cold 16-ounce Coors, served in sturdy plastic commemorative cups, cost a measly \$2.00. That, my track-lovin' friends, was how to host a meet!

Atlanta was fun at night, though, I will admit that (though New Orleans kicked butt in that area too). We spent several evenings in Buckhead, bouncing from one bar to another, imbibing with the enthusiasm of people who could Sleep In the next morning. I'm sure there were many good stories of our antics and foolishnesses, but they all just blurred together into one foamy head.

One Buckhead memory that is crisp, though, was yet another Atlanta ripoff scam. We were not familiar with the area yet, same as many people in town for the week, and when we got to the blocks that the map told us made up Buckhead, we began to look for parking.

Well, there on the left was a big parking lot. Imagine that, a lot of land made just for parking. Know what we did? We parked there!

It was no big deal, really; it was big lot, which, by day, served a long and low shopping plaza. By night, with all the stores closed, it seemed the ideal spot to park and dive into Buckhead on foot. We certainly all thought so, and apparently so did the 100 or so cars that were already parked there. The lot held at least double that, and would fill up within the next hour or so after we arrived. I knew that because, for some reason, I walked – staggered? — out to the car sometime shortly after midnight, and was stunned by what I saw.

The lot was already nearly half empty, and a half-dozen flatbed tow trucks were rapidly chewing through the remaining crowd. It was like watching Truck PacMan. These guys obviously did this frequently, because they were like clockwork. While the driver of each two-man team would back up to a car, his partner was already under it, securing the chain. The car would be swiped off the ground in less than a minute, the truck would zoom out, and the next truck would back up to the next car, which already had a chain guy under it.

They wiped out a whole row while I watched, dumbfounded. I knew I had no time to go back and find whomever it was who was driving the rental that night, so I walked over to our car and sat on the trunk. When the chain guy got close enough, I said, "The guy with the key will be here any second. How can you guys do this? It's a public parking lot."

"Nope," he replied, and pointed upwards. "If y'are still here when we clear those rows, ya goin' too."

I looked up at the light pole where he had pointed. Well above eye-level, was a 12"x18" sign, stating that the lot was Private Property and that violators would be towed to Freakin' A-Hole Tow Yard, nearby, at the vehicle owner's expense. [OK, it wasn't really "Freakin' A-Hole", it just seemed like it at the time.] The sign was waaaaaay too small, non-reflective, and much too high for anybody to ever think to look up there. It was such a screwing.

"Unbelievable, isn't it?" suddenly said a voice from beside me as I sat on the trunk watching the systematic clearing of the lot. It reminded me of snowplows clearing a lot after a blizzard.

I turned to see who had spoken. "They do this every night," the man said, shaking his head. "They fuck the tourists over every single night. At \$100 a car, they make a fucking fortune off this lot."

I simply nodded stupidly. (I do that well.)

"They'll take you too," he warned. "They won't give a shit if you're still on the car or not." And he walked away.

Fortunately, our driver must have gotten wind of the tow truck feast and came a-runnin' just before chain guy came back to claim us.

The next night, we parked elsewhere, but we saw an almost-full lot when we drove by. I noticed that it was an almost empty lot when I caught a glimpse of it a couple hours later.

Another night, though, we sought variety from the guzzle-and-belch bar scene of "the 'head", and found a nightclub that featured live blues. When we got there, the name of the singer made us laugh: Lotsa Poppa.

There was indeed Lotsa this Poppa. He was an enormous, old, black man who was dressed like he just came from a sale at Golfers 'R' Us. He looked a bit ridiculous at first, but, man, he could really belt out the blues.

Gogs was in our group that week, and that night. He was diggin' the blues, as the rest of us were, though Neil Young mighta been more his style. Gogs is a true character: he was passionate about baseball, and had even blown off that day of Track & Field to go across the street to Fulton County Stadium to take in a Braves game – he even brought his glove with him. How many 43-year-olds that you know do that?

Well, as it happened, Major League Baseball's all-time leader in walks and runs and stolen bases, a twenty-four-year veteran of nine teams, Rickey Henderson – yes, THE Rickey Henderson – was in the club that night too. With his female companion, he had settled into a table along the back wall of the room. I think it was Ed who first noticed him, and casually mentioned it under the music to someone else. We all kinda looked over, said, “hey, yeah, it is,” and went back to blues.

Not Gogs, though. He got all bouncy and animated. “That’s Rickey! That’s Rickey!” he kept saying. Then he got up, walked right over to the baseball legend and introduced himself. From across the room, we were aghast that Gogs would just barge in on this star and his lady, who were clearly dodging the spotlight.

Gogs has an engaging personality, a sincere smile, and is quick to laugh. Their conversation seemed to launch reasonably well. Rickey did not simply nod and wave the peasant away; he was graciously patient. Then Gogs and Rickey shook hands, then Gogs and Rickey’s lady shook hands, and their discussion continued, with Rickey smiling and even laughing, his lady laughing, Gogs laughing, and I swear at one point Rickey motioned to a seat for Gogs, which Gogs gave a polite “no thanks” wave-off to. I’ll bet, though, that if the woman had not been there, that Gogs would have pulled up a chair and dazzled the ten-time all-star with insights and observations on Baseball According To Gogs.

It seemed to be Gogs who ended the conversation, but as he began to step away, Rickey again stuck out his hand for a shake. When Gogs returned to the table, he was one content man. We all had the same question: “What the hell did you talk about??”

“Baseball,” Gogs replied, with an *of course* tone, “I asked him how he liked the National League after all those years in the American.”

We were pretty satisfied with Gogs’ choice of interview questions, and settled back into a night full of the howling blues of Lotsa Poppa.