

Coolo California

Fock 8: The Other Side of the T&F Trials

Track & Field -- also known somewhat vaguely as "Athletics" -- is one of the most popular sports in the world, but here in the USA, it pretty much gets swallowed up by the more "major" sports. You kind of have to know it to love it. We esoteric few who appreciate the pure fury of the competition, and who look beyond the simple numbers to savor the battles that underlie them, look at the rest of you as boors and sluggards, but we do so affectionately.

So, I won't presume to recount any of the actual T&F action; that would be mundane, even for me. However, there were plenty of things peripheral to the actual meet that do warrant mention. Herewith are some of the "other" noteworthies of the 2000 United States Olympic Track & Field Trials...

RAM'S BEST & WORST OF THE OLYMPIC TRIALS

Worst Trials Experience, Bronze Medal: Buying Beer Before the Men's 5000

Revved up by Regina Jacobs' electrifying American Record in the Women's 5000 Meter Run, Ed and I decided to grab a celebratory brew with which to toast her success. We speculated that we had time to dash to the beer stand and be back in time for the Men's 5000, about 10 minutes away. We scurried through the crowd, and down the stairs, and felt vindicated when we saw three lines of only about three people per line. He took one line, I took the middle one. When he looked ahead and saw his cashier in bewilderment about how to work her register, he hopped to my line, where the guy in front of me had just scored two cups of the prized nectar. Then, already made wary by longer-than-necessary delays, which were bringing us closer to the start of the 5K, we found ourselves looking into the face of a woman behind the cash register as she was saying, "This isn't a line, there is no register here. You'll have to get in one of the other lines."

Looking at the register that was rubbing against her crotch, I begged to differ, and informed her that I would do no such thing, and that it was imperative that she procure us four Budweisers forthwith. I didn't use those words, of course, but they sound a whole lot nicer than the ones I did utter. After all, this was my biggest moment of stress in nine days -- and a worthy cause too, wouldn't you say? -- and I approached it with outright indignation.

Somehow, she seemed to realize that I would not be brushed aside like the pathetic California sheep who obediently shuffled to either side, that I was a Man on a Mission, and that those Buds must be poured posthaste. She commissioned a competent-looking man -- as opposed to the incompetent unfocused nincompoops who seemed to staff each booth all week -- to attend to our needs, and, as the racers were being introduced, I felt confident once again that we would have our beverages in time.

Alas, the ordeal was far from over. The taps in front of us, as well as the ones on our right, were not pouring at all. Out Of Beer, it would seem. The one remaining tap was slowly bleeding foam from its nozzle. To the man's credit, though, he actually nudged one of the nincompoops aside, pulling rank as it were, to get our much more important beers.

Meanwhile, the race had started. After a couple of laps, we had two full cups, which I gave to Ed and he went off to the fence to watch the race run by. *Four laps later*, I had the other two in my possession, and joined Ed by the fence. It was an odd view: we got a fine track-side look at the field -- albeit from the waist up -- as they sped by, then had to resort to watching the Jumbotron to see most of the rest of each lap.

Worst Experience, Silver Medal: Buying a Burger, Anytime

And as bad as the beer stand lines were, it wasn't as bad as trying to get a burger at any time during the week. I waited in a long line, finally placed my order, watched somebody else go to some tall plastic racks to fill my order, and then I was handed a tidy package in aluminum foil. I remember thinking that it seemed awfully light. As I stepped aside from the booth, eager to chow down my coveted cheeseburger, I realized that I had been given a bun. Nothing else: just a bun. Miffed, I returned to the cashier to report the missing meat. She motioned to another long line near a grill where burgers and sausages and dogs were cooking. [Hot dogs, that is, not real dogs: that would've been gross.]

So, another long queuing experience ensued. I expected that I would simply be handed a freshly cooked slab of fine California beef once I reached the front of the line, but no no no, Nanette, it just ain't that simple here. Once there, I had to reorder, and wait while they threw a frozen patty on the fire and cooked it. And to make it a cheeseburger, they took the cooked burger off the fire, put a piece of cold cheese on top of it, and presented it for bunning. All in all, *quite* an ordeal, for a very poor representation of a cheeseburger.

Worst Experience, Gold Medal: Cramped in a Sellout Crowd

There were definitely mixed emotions about the highly-touted sellout crowds at CSUS Stadium. Though it was encouraging to see high attendance at any Track Meet, the four of us pined for the lounging room of New Orleans and the walk-around room of Indianapolis and Los Angeles. Atlanta's Gestapo ushers saw to it that there would be little wandering in '96, but at least they had comfortable plastic seats.

SacreMerde was a claustrophobe's nightmare, with knees in the back, thigh against thigh, carry-bag at the heels, and 99° heat that was only occasionally mitigated by the coveted "Delta Breeze". The worst of it all though, was the damn aluminum bench! The minimal clothing we were all wearing meant minimal gluteal padding, which was an extra woe for the lean and slim of buttock like Ed, Bryan, Doon, and myself.

The only thing that saved our behinds – literally – was the nice, round, semi-firm rubber seat cushions that were being sold at the souvenir booth. I didn't even know they were available, because they weren't hanging on the back wall of the booth like every other item was. After only a couple of hours of metal-butting, I needed to go walkabout and get some posterior circulation back. Checking out the T-shirts and hats seemed like a good way to justify a walk.



I was next in line at the booth, when the woman next to me turned away with her purchase, and out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a shiny red 16" circular slab of what looked like rubber. I nearly grabbed her, as I eagerly blurted out, "Where did you get that?!?"

She looked at me somewhat aghast, as if I had just rudely asked a very stupid question. I guess I *had* just rudely asked a very stupid question, but the urgent need to protect my esteemed buns superceded my sense of proper decorum. "Right here," she snorted indignantly in reply, silently adding the phrase "you damn drunk" with her eyes.

"Cool!" I grinned, and zealously pressed for more info: "How much?" (Not that cost mattered with the prospect of seven more days of alumibuns hanging over me.)

Obviously not savoring our conversation, the woman was nearly running away when she answered "Ten dollars." Her behavior might have annoyed me, except that I'm used to having women act that way when I try to converse with them at clubs and such. I dunno; women are just funny like that I guess.

So I procured my Coveted Cushion. I got a blue one, which is good: I've always been more of a blue guy than a red guy. When I returned to section 205, row K, I had one damn smug look on my face, knowing how deeply Ed and Bryan would envy my behind. By the next afternoon, we all had cushions and much happier haunches.

Happiest Track Fan: The Asian Long Jump Fan

We did not always have the same people seated around us throughout the week. On the evening of Men's Long Jump qualifying, we had an Asian family seated two rows in front of us. The Massachusetts family (see Unhappiest Track Fan) had not yet arrived, so we temporarily had footroom, and a clearer contact with these three: a gray-haired grandfather type, a small and quiet younger woman, and the Long Jump Fan, a healthy-looking man in his early thirties who I suppose was the younger woman's husband.

The man LOVED seeing men jump into sand. Even though our upper section seats were quite far up from ground level, and our location near the top of the backstretch put us roughly even with where the jumpers *started* their approaches, this guy roared his approval on every jump. "WHOOOAAAAA!!!"

he would bellow as the jumper went airborne. It didn't matter if the jump was a blatant foul, or if the jump only taped out at 24 feet. And when it did happen to be a good jump, as soon as the distance was posted, he would "WHOOOAAAAA!!!" all over again. Damn, he was having a rocking good time!

And, yes, I did say "taped out", because the officials were using tape measures! With all the highly accurate and much faster triangulation devices available, they were still measuring the events with nylon tape measure. Odd, we all thought. But, then again, we were all track officials, and we were into this kind of shtuff.

Unhappiest Track Fan: Pouty Girl

The Massachusetts family was in front of us from the second day on. They consisted of: a father, who supposedly was the coach of some brand new central Mass. Track club (or, "he thinks he is", as his middle daughter confided to us), a very pleasant mother, a did-not-look-old-enough-to-be-in-college daughter who ran the 1500 for Duke, an I'm-not-happy-to-be-here-but-I'll-be-a-trooper-about-it high school age daughter, and a young girl who was about 7 or 8. Maybe 6, I don't know, I didn't check her ID – she probably didn't have one anyway. I sure didn't when I was 7 or 8 or maybe 6.

Anyway, the second day of the meet was the longest of the whole week, and they had gotten there early (even a few hours earlier than us). They did not have the savvy to bring or buy seat cushions, and their buns must have been RAW. Well, the Dukie and the trooper were trying to deal with it, but the young one was just plain *miserable*. She whined and squirmed and tried to sit on mom's lap – like mom needed more weight on her metal-battered bottom. When she finally began to spill the tears, I offered my towel (which I had been using to keep my smuggled beers cold) for her to fold and sit on (I only had one beer left, so it wasn't that magnanimous of a gesture. Plus, the towel was rather dirty.).

I can't really blame her, I guess. At her age, I would have felt tortured in a stifling crowd, watching ten hours of an event that I had ZERO interest in, and having my butt barnacled by a bloody bench.

The next day they arrived much later, with a supply of blue foam that dad had bought at Home Depot or someplace and had cut into foldable squares for use as ass pads. They were all a bit more content, but I think Pouty Girl will be scarred for life by that first day. Whenever she sees an aluminum bench, she will shudder. When Track comes on the Olympics, she will begin to twitch and unconsciously rub her buttocks. Her grandchildren will wonder why...

Most Unusual Track Fan (tie): Loincloth Man

He was near us all week, but it wasn't until Doon arrived that he came out of his shell. The first half of the week, he was just this weird-looking guy: about 70, permanent scowl on his face, squinting behind his thickish sunglasses, darkly tanned, shirtless to show off his scrawny, wrinkly, sagging chest, and wearing shorts rolled up to his crotch to expose his bony veiny legs. The at-a-glance impression was that this was a castaway in a loincloth, some terribly confused weirdo who had gotten voted off an island a long, long time ago. Oh, yes, and he had a cell phone hooked to his waistband, just to look even odder.

We paid no attention to him – he looked like the type you did not want to start a conversation with, for fear that you'd never be able to get out of it. But somehow, once Doon got there and our group of three expanded to four, Loincloth Man became vocal. Doon was buffered by two very pleasant guys to his left, but once chatting with them, he opened a window of opportunity, and Loincloth Man began to blurt his way into conversations. Thankfully, I heard very little of what he had to say, but his acrid tone belied his bitterness.

"Arrogant pig!" he called Craig Masback (the President of USA Track & Field), just because somebody – presumably Masback -- had chosen the jumping pit closest to the field to jump in, instead of the one closest to the track. Now, the difference was about 10 feet all totaled up, which made little nevermind to us, being a good 200 feet away anyway. But it sure did rile up Loincloth Man, who boasted that he had gone up to Masback himself to complain, only to be brushed aside by the "arrogant pig". We just brushed him aside. Guess we were arrogant pigs too. Oink, oink, Loincloth Man.

Most Unusual Track Fan (tie): Rasta Man

A throwback to hippie days, Rasta Man shuffled around in battered sandals, wore a Rastafari T-shirt, and had long dreadlocks. And I mean, lonnnnnnnnnng dreadlocks. These braids went down to the middle of his calf muscles! I started to wonder how he kept them clean, but then took a good look and told my mind to withdraw the question.

The funny thing is that I *know* I've seen him at the Trials before, and I'm quite sure I have a picture of him taken at Indianapolis in '92, when his hair was only shoulder length or a tad more. I just searched and searched my boxes and closets and shelves for my 1992 photos, and found everything but. Then I realized that in the time I spent searching for that One Picture, I could have written A Thousand Words. Hmmmmmm....

Best Parking Lot: Lot 4

Multiple parking lots serve CSUS Stadium, with some having better ingress/egress than others. After a couple of nights of sitting idly as long lines of post-meet traffic squeezed out ahead of us, we began to realize that the lot we had been steered into just wasn't cutting it. So, on Day Three, as we entered campus, we sought alternatives. All traffic was crawling into two lanes, and being fed into Lots 1 and 2. The right-hand lane was empty. We gave it a shot, and drove on up the road. Sure enough, there was some college kid, sitting bored on in a chair, with an orange flag across his lap, waiting for people to arrive.

We pulled up, and asked, "Is this lot for spectators?" It seemed too good to be true. It was close enough to the track to be reserved for athletes or coaches or officials.

"Yup, sure is!"

"Great," we replied. "How is it getting out of here?" we queried, wary of an even longer delay from this more interior lot.

"Easy," he smiled, still not getting up, "Just go right down there, take a right, and you're on the main drag." Sweet.

We took our choice of spots under a wide shady tree. The lot filled up fast shortly thereafter, so we deduced that the staff was trying to fill them in order, for whatever reason. We also figured out that, if you could exit from that road, you should also be able to enter from there. It became our in-the-know route, which we shared with many of the other Lot 4 loyalists for the rest of the week.

I have always been one to see the value in the good parking spot, and will arrive as early as necessary to guarantee a quality spot. Lot 4 was not huge, so it was clearly worth a slightly earlier departure from the Heritage.

Lot 4 served as a good place to collect our thoughts. Parked in the shade, with the AC flowing, the TV showing the local news, the seats reclined, and a cooler wells-stocked with what Ed kept calling "wink-wink lemonades" – as in, "I think I'll have a (wink-wink) lemonade" – we had plenty of time and comfort for our pre-meet necessities.

Half the fun of the Trials, for us, was doing a USOT Pool. We each picked the top three in each event, and correct picks were rewarded from a point scale, pari-mutuel style. This Lot 4 Time allowed us to casually review our selections so we could know who to cheer for as the meet resumed each day.

It also gave us time to cleverly stash our contraband. The stadium did not allow beverages to be brought in. Like in Atlanta, they wanted to corner the market on consumables. We, however, viewed this as both a challenge, and as a violation of our liberty. The latter cause, of course, was one of those noble-sounding things that give a flimsy case some substance by affiliating it with patriotism. Anyway, we smuggled in our own bevs.

At first, this was no big deal. My shoulder bag, though it looked like an innocent photographer's bag, was insulated and deep. On Day One, I casually carried 13 bottles of beer, and ice, right through the gate.

Somebody wised up, though, because on Day Two, as we neared the gate, we could see that the ushers were making people open their bags, and remove offending items. We retreated to Blue Man to formulate a Plan B. My bag was deep enough that I actually created a false bottom in it with a folded-over towel, and placed four cold wink-winks underneath. At the gate, I held the bag by the bottom, unzipped the top, and invited the usher to peer inside. He took a cursory poke at my clipboard, camera, sunscreen, spare T-shirt, and whatever, and gave me the go-ahead. It worked every time.

Lot 4 was close enough to the stadium that it was easy to go out to the van during a lull in the events, grab a sandwich and a bev, and just get out of the sun for a while. It also gave ample opportunity for reloading the secret compartment. At five-bucks-a-Bud at the beer stands, this represented a significant savings. More importantly, we thumbed our noses at tyranny.

And true to the attendant's word, our egress was a delta breeze.

Best Post-Meet Watering Hole: T.G.I. Friday's

Getting a quick exit was important in another sense too: it got us to T.G.I. Friday's before all the bar stools were taken. All of us are bar-oriented people. If there are four or fewer, we'll take our meal at the bar, where the sauce is handier.

Friday's was THE post-meet hangout. Athletes, coaches, officials, and fans like us descended on the medium-sized restaurant to quaff and quench after a good afternoon and evening of quality athletics.

One night, as we hunched over our burgers and tall-colds, a diminutive woman excused her way between Doon and Bryan. She looked very familiar to us. When she ordered a beer, the bartender asked for her ID. The woman laughed heartily at the compliment, and produced her driver's license. When she turned away from the bar, clutching her coveted Guinness Stout draught, we got a good look at her, and our suspicions were confirmed. It was Deena Drossin, winner of the Women's 10,000 Meter Run – less than an hour before -- and runner-up in the 5000 earlier in the week.

Deena, all 5'4"/104 pounds of her, who would later go on to set American Records in the 10K (in 2002) and Marathon (in 2003), stood there with her companion, downing a celebratory pint of grog, grinning widely, and making a perfect poster child for the "Guinness Gives You Strength" ad campaign.

There were many others, of course, but those stand out. I and my cronies had attended this outstanding event for five straight editions now ('84, '88, '92, '96, and '00), and the meet had never failed to please. It's pure track heaven, baby, and, if you're runner, nothing else comes close.

Sacramento was clearly the centerpiece of this ramack, but every centerpiece is surrounded by a big dinner table, and this feast had plenty of courses to go. The southern tier was done; the northern route lay ahead.

It was time to start the long and winding road home. Home from Sacramento!!