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Al Oerter - a portrait of the quadruple Olympic Discus champion (Jonas Hedman)

Al Oerter – past and present reflections

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Athletics history is filled with great athletes, and truly one of the best was quadruple Olympic Discus champion Alfred Oerter (USA). With the exception of long jumper and fellow countryman Carl Lewis, he is the only track and field Olympian** who has won four straight Olympic gold medals in one single event.

Recently, Oerter who is now 66-years-old, from his home in Florida talked to *Jonas Hedman for the IAAF internet*, about the past, the present and the future of Discus throwing.

A sprinter becomes a thrower

The story about how Al Oerter became a Discus thrower is almost like a fairy-tale. The place was Sewanhaka High School's athletic field on Long Island, New York, and it was the spring of 1952. Oerter, at the time 15-years-old, was running on the track when a Discus skipped onto it. He picked it up and threw it back, further than the discus thrower had thrown it towards him...!

"Yes, it's a true story. I started as a sprinter,



Al Oerter of USA throwing for his first Olympic Discus gold in Melbourne in 1956 (Getty Images)

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then became a middle distance runner for a few months, and then this happened", says Oerter, 51 years later.

In 1956, at the US Olympic Trials in Los Angeles, the 19-year-old Oerter only had one throw long enough to qualify him for the US team, and that became the start of a 12 year long Olympic career.

At the Games in Melbourne, he beat the World record holder Fortune Gordien, and at the press conference after the meet when a journalist asked Oerter if he expected to win more medals, replied, "I am not going to quit until I win five gold medals".

After that Oerter won in Rome 1960, Tokyo 1964 and Mexico City 1968, setting an Olympic record on all four occasions. In the 1968 final he exceeded his previous personal record three times, winning with 64.78 metres.

However, after that he decided not to go for a fifth gold in the Munich 1972 Olympics. He stopped training and only participated in a few competitions in 1969.

During the autumn of 1975, the TV producer Bud Greenspan asked Oerter if he wanted to take part in a TV series about Olympic athletes. He agreed and did some voice-overs when they filmed in an old stadium on Randalls Island, New York.

It was at that moment that Oerter started thinking about a comeback, and one and a half years later he was throwing over 60 metres, and his goal was set: to qualify for the Olympic Games in Moscow 1980. After a eight year long break he was back on track!

In the end of May 1980, Oerter set a personal record with a throw of 69.46m, which exceeded his winning throw in Mexico City by almost five metres! He finished fourth in the "US Olympic Trials" but the athletes already knew that no American would compete in Moscow. President Jimmy Carter had called for a US boycott months earlier, protesting against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

In 1984, aged 47, he was again in great shape, but hurt his Achilles tendon a few weeks before the Olympic Trials and couldn't participate. At the age of 50, he threw 62.40 and finished his career three years later, winning the World Veteran Championships in Eugene, Oregon.

"Too much money"

During his more than 30 year long career, he competed against many of the best Discus throwers of the 20th century, and also experienced how the sport changed from a fun hobby for amateurs to a business with a lot of money involved.

"When I started throwing during the 1950s, everybody tried to look as smooth and relaxed as possible in the ring. When I came back into the sport in the late 70s most of the throwers had a severe and bulky style."

"There was much more money involved. The athletes didn't talk to each other during competitions and I couldn't understand the rivalry. We should just go out there and throw as far as we possibly could and then have a beer. That's what it's all about."

"During the 50s and 60s there was a good friendship between the throwers and I really knew these guys. My two Olympic team-

mates from Melbourne 1956, Fortune Gordien and Desmond Koch, have passed away, and Ludvik Danek is also no longer with us. But Rink Babka, who took the silver medal in Rome 1960, is around and we are still friends”.

During the 1960s the World record was broken twelve (ratified) times, and was improved from 59.91 to 68.40 by five different throwers. Oerter produced four of those World records in that period.

"Fazekas... can break the World record"

In 1986 Jürgen Schult (DDR) set the current record (74.08) and that's by far (16 years) the longest time a World discus record has stood. Have we reached the limit of how far it's possible to throw?

"I am sure someone could throw 80 meters in the future," confirms Oerter. "Today, it's all about speed and how to apply greater force over a longer period of time. I was in Monaco last year and heard about Róbert Fazekas (HUN) who threw 71.70. He is very quick in the ring and not too big (193 cm/105 kg), and I think he is the type of thrower that can break the World record”.

"A person can physically throw 80 metres, the limiting factor is the size of the circle. A young person with a height of about 190 cm, a good arm length and a phenomenal turning capacity can definitely throw much further than the World record. I tried to show basketball player Wilt Chamberlain how to throw the discus once, but he couldn't do it because, at 216 cm, he was too tall for the ring.”

"When I was in my early 40s, I did some tests with the sport scientist Gideon Ariel, who is a former Discus thrower from Israel. He put electrodes on my body and digitized the throw which showed where I accelerated and de-accelerated. He determined that I, at the time the age of 42, could throw 75 metres without any problem, if I just maintained the acceleration that I began with in the actual throw. I was accelerating, and then de-accelerating in the middle of the throw as I was putting myself into the throwing position, and then re-accelerating.”

"If a thrower could maintain constant acceleration until the point of release of the Discus the force would be so much greater and the Discus would land much further away from you. I really think that's possible for a young person with the correct physical condition. I threw 75 metres at the age of 47. What could an athlete 20 years younger throw?"

In the 60s, Oerter threw a lot during his training sessions, 70–80 throws was not unusual, and all of them was with full force. During his 'second' career he changed several things in his training and started to work on the bad parts of his technique. He also started lifting much more weights. Only six months after his comeback he was lifting at the same level as when he was at his best during his first career. In 1968, he pushed 200kg on the bench press. 1984 he pushed 229 kg with two repetitions.

74m plus in training!

There are several Discus throwers over the years that have exceeded their personal best during unofficial meet circumstances or training sessions. Oerter is no exception.

In 1984, at the age of 47, he was involved in a project when they recorded him and other throwers with a high speed camera,

while they were throwing. It was in Coto De Caza, California, and they were throwing on a tennis court that was surrounded by small hills. However, the film kept breaking and Oerter had to take throw after throw to satisfy the camera man.

"It was very hot and I started to get more and more angry because of all problems with the camera. I pushed harder and harder for every throw and started landing the discus on the hill and then on the other side. They tried to measure it and found that it was 217 feet (66 m) to the base of the hill, which was 15 feet high (about 4.5 m), and finally measured the throw to be around 245 feet (74.68) long!"

A painter now

Al Oerter worked as a computer specialist for Grumman Data Systems for 28 years. Later he worked for Reebok. Today, he and his wife Cathy are living permanently in Florida, and until February 2003, Oerter was lifting weights regularly.

In May 2002 he had a defibrillator installed in his chest because of heart problems caused by 65 years of high blood pressure. In March 2003 he had congestive heart failure that was pretty serious but recovered, and now again spends time with his hobby – painting abstract acrylic pictures.

"When I look back on my Discus career it's the length of time I was in the sport that I am most proud of, not the individual medals. I left the sport with the same attitude that I entered it – with the joy of throwing!"

Jonas Hedman for the IAAF

**note – excluding American Ray Ewry's four golds in both the standing High Jump and Long Jump in the Olympics of 1900, 1904, 1906 (interim Games), 1908.

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