

World's Greatest Athletes Run (Throw and Jump) to Victory

by Ian Granick

ATLANTA—While US television viewers have no doubt been pulled to focus on the US Basketball's *DreamTeam*, or sports with similar depths of cultural resonance like baseball and boxing or even "traditional Olympic favorites" like swimming and gymnastics, some of the most exciting and impressive displays of physical and psychological prowess occurred this year in the multi-sport Decathlon.

The Decathlon, which was first included in the 1904 St. Louis Olympics, is a powerhouse competition consisting of 10 individual events taking place on two consecutive days. The Day 1 competitions are the 100m dash, the long jump, the shot put, the high jump, and the 400m dash. On Day 2 athletes compete in the 110m hurdles, the discus throw, the pole vault, the javelin throw, and the 1,500m run.

This year's Decathlon came down to an ever fluctuating and riveting competition between two US favorites: Dan O'Brien, the reigning World Decathlon Champion, and Chris Huffins.

From the opening shot signaling the start of the 100 meter dash, the competition was stellar. Huffins ripped across the track toward victory, running the fastest 100 meters in the 80-year history of the event. From there he went on to win two more events, making career bests in the long jump with a 25 foot, 11.5 inch leap and the shot-put with a throw of 53 feet, 11.25 inches. He scored an additional career best with a 6 foot, 7.5 inch high jump but was still 2.25 inches shy of event victory.

Not giving in easily, O'Brien rocketed with a high jump of 6 feet, 9.75 inches, and a lightening fast 400 meter dash in 46.81 seconds. However, despite winning both of these events by impressive margins, he still trailed Huffins with day-end averages of 4,687 points to 4,618.

However, this is the Decathlon, one of the most intense physical competitions in the Olympic cannon. Decathletes are considered by many to be the best, most well-rounded athletes in sports—all sports, and once every four years, the Olympic Gold Medalist winner is crowned the "greatest athlete in the world." So, as the sun set and then rose again on Georgia, the competition was only half way over and neither athlete was in any way assured victory or loss.

At the start of Day 2, O'Brien faced the pole vault and prepared to wrestle



Dan O'Brien effortlessly clears 14 feet 9 inches on his first try in the pole vault during the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Decathlon.

with his demons. 4 years ago, he had suffered a devastating personal defeat when he failed to make the 1992 Olympic Team after flubbing this event. The failure left him shaken.

For three years, O'Brien tried to forget, to regroup, to move on, but he could not. Finally O'Brien surrendered and approached Jim Reardon, a psychologist affiliated with the United States track and field federation.

"When I think about the pole vault in Atlanta, I'm anxious, I feel my heart start to beat," O'Brien told Reardon.

Reardon helped O'Brien to turn his fear into power. And on Day 2, O'Brien turned that power into victory. He effortlessly cleared the 14 foot, 9 inch height and then continued jumping until he had matched his career best in a decathlon, 17 feet, .75 inches easily winning the event despite Huffins' career best 15 foot, 9 inch vault.

O'Brien then threw a career best of 214 feet in the javelin.

It was now time for O'Brien to turn his attention to the 1,500 meter run. He had hoped to break his event world record of 4 minutes, 43.48 seconds and to match or beat his 8,891 point decathlon world record. But the afternoon sun beat down on the stadium creating brutal conditions with 111 degree heat and he could not keep the required pace. However, despite the struggle, O'Brien still ran to victory, scoring 5 minute 12.01 second win in the 1,500 meter.

Holding a two day accumulation of 8,726 points, almost 200 points ahead of Huffins, O'Brien was awarded the Gold and the title "the greatest athlete in the world."

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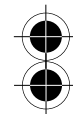
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