

From The Sunday Times

December 27, 2009

Best & Worst: Geoff Capes

What was the best moment of your career?

Winning gold at the 1974 Commonwealth Games in Gothenburg. I threw just under 69 feet (20.95m), which was a Commonwealth record at the time. It was my first major international success and it meant more than it does now because the Games used to be so much more competitive. Receiving your first invitation to compete as an international is incredibly special. I got a letter from the Queen — or Prince Philip — who was the patron at the time, that's the proudest moment of an international's career. I'll never forget my debut; the team included the likes of Alan Pascoe and David Bedford and I beat the European junior champion, a Frenchman called Patrick Chala.

What was the worst moment of your career?

Not winning an Olympic gold and finishing 22nd out of 23 in the 1964 All-England Schools championships. A lot of people thought I should have won an Olympic gold, including Stuart [Storey — Capes' long-time coach and mentor]. But it wasn't to be. They only come around every four years and you need a bit of luck. About three weeks before the Moscow Games in 1980 I couldn't even walk, I was staying at Stuart's house, I lay down one night and couldn't move; my legs were paralysed; incidents like that can change everything.

What was the best thing about being an athlete in your era?

The camaraderie that came with travelling the globe as an amateur with all those other special athletes; we dedicated our lives to the sport purely out of love for competing with little, if any, financial rewards. The quality of athletes who were willing to pass on their knowledge seemed much greater back then. Athletes, by nature, have to be selfish but I always felt part of a larger family.

And the worst thing?

The sacrifices, especially considering the lack of financial support. You had to develop a blinkered approach when you were competing. There is no comparison with how athletes today get provided for, be it coaching, expenses, travel, equipment, medical attention or sponsorship. My only sponsor was my local butcher who supplied me with extra meat, it was essentially a protein sponsorship, so I got free meat, eggs and milk. I worked nights as a policeman at the time and you had to try and fit preparation for major championships in and around that. I would work a beat on the Friday night, compete on the Saturday and be back for the next shift on the Sunday.

Who was the best athlete you captained in the GB squad?

I was fortunate to come through in an era that included the likes of Alan Pascoe, David Hemery and Brendan Foster and then when I was a senior international in the late Seventies I captained greats such as Steve Cram, Seb Coe and Steve Ovett, who were part of a real golden generation so it's impossible to choose from any of those.

And the best opponent you competed against?



Geoff Capes in 1976

That's tough. I was around in what I would call the greatest era for throwing. I was fortunate to be awarded a Churchill scholarship in 1974, which sent me to eastern Europe and America to learn as much as I could about the tactical aspects of the shot. I went to California and my roommates were John Powell, world record holder, discus, Bruce Jenner, world record holder, decathlon, and Brian Oldfield who, to answer your question, is the greatest shot putter who ever lived. Each training session was like a bloody Olympic final.

What was the best advice you were given?

The biggest influence on my career was Stuart Storey, who was from the same Lincolnshire village as me. The fact that he had been an Olympian in 1968 was a huge inspiration to me. It also meant he understood me as a person.

What is the worst thing about modern athletics?

For a while, athletics lost its way; other sports, such as rugby, infiltrated the throwing talent that used to come from the industrial and farming heartlands. Compared with when I was growing up, partly because of increased mechanisation, few people work the land or work manually now. I try to instil that lost ethic into my group of athletes but they are mostly students and think working for two hours is giving a lot. I worked eight hours a day on the land, then came home and worked three hours on my family's land and then went training for two hours.

WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

I am now 60 years old and living in Lincolnshire. I am still involved on the athletics side. I have my own group of athletes, whom I am preparing for the London Olympics in 2012 and I also help coach at Loughborough University. UK and England Athletics have finally decided to use my experience and expertise so I'm now helping them with up-and-coming throwers. Away from the field, I am a magistrate and an award-winning budgerigar breeder. I breed Recessive Pieds but in a unique way; I pair them with Normals of the highest standard in my stud to produce top-quality Recessive Pied outcrosses. Between my birds, my students and the courthouse, I now don't get much free time.

ON TV TODAY

The World's Strongest Man, featuring Geoff Capes, 1983

11pm ESPN Classic, Sky channel 429

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