

Oldfield down--but not for the count

Poor, with a battered body, the shot-put original tries to leave his mark

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An obsession with shot putting helped wreck Brian Oldfield's life. Now it might be the only thing that can save him.

Oldfield was a freaky combination of strength, speed and shrewd intelligence who burst out of Elgin to revolutionize his sport, perfecting a twisting windup that let him hurl a 16-pound iron ball farther than anyone on Earth.

Lusty, profane and rebellious, he became one of the memorable characters of the swinging 1970s, sparring with Muhammad Ali, trading barbs with Don Rickles and reveling in tales of the "sado numbers" he inflicted on biker gangs.

"When God invented man, he wanted him to look like me," he was said to have bragged in 1975. Though Oldfield denies using the line, it has been immortalized in a book of quotations under the subject of conceit.

The passion that made Oldfield great, however, had a destructive side. He piled injury upon injury to extend his career. He used steroids, partied hard, chased women. He passed up stable job opportunities to stay in the game.

Today, Oldfield, 61, lives alone in a small Elgin condo he calls the Leper Colony. He's still the size of a grizzly bear, but 16 surgeries have left him so crippled he can't take a step without pain. Jobless, he gets by on disability checks and food stamps.

With a friend's help, he plans to launch a Web site advertising his availability as a shot-put guru for hire. Success, he hopes, will bring money, respect and the restoration of his life's purpose.

"I tried coaching. I tried real estate. I tried boxing. I was in the disco business," Oldfield said, his voice as rough as ground glass. "I kept trying to replace the excitement of throwing with something else, but I never did it.

"That's my business. It's the only thing where I know what I'm talking about. It's the only thing where everyone will shut up and listen to me."

In the spotlight

There was a time when everyone did listen to Brian Oldfield--at least everyone with a pennyweight of sense. He was a 6-foot-5-inch, 280-pound slab of muscle with a short fuse and a streak of defiance as wide as his shoulders.

That attitude came from an Elgin childhood he describes as one long battle with authority. He was a hyper and impertinent boy, a combination he says got him kicked out of kindergarten, the Cub Scouts, even Sunday school.

"My personality didn't fit," he said. "I'd be up at the windows looking at the squirrels. It seems like I've always been slapped around and pushed around to fit."

Though he was always a great athlete, he didn't like the rigidity of team games, so he tried gymnastics and wrestling before settling on the explosive, deceptively complex event of shot putting.

"Every body part is doing something different in a very quick amount of time--less than a second," said Scott Cappos, a track coach at Iowa. "If you're going to do it correctly, every body part has to be in position. A lot can go wrong in that second."

Oldfield had enough natural ability to earn a scholarship to Middle Tennessee State and a place at the 1972 Munich Olympics, where he finished sixth.

But in 1974, he transformed the event. That's when he dropped the traditional "glide" method of throwing--in which the athlete takes a backward hop before unleashing the shot--for a radically new delivery.

The "rotational" technique emulates the spin of a discus thrower, allowing the shot putter to build extra speed before powering the metal ball into flight. Oldfield refined the little-used style, and on May 10, 1975, he threw the shot 75 feet, almost 3 1/2 feet farther than the previous world record. (The current world mark is 75-10 1/4.)

"Before the ball landed, I went, `Yeaaaaah,'" he recalled. "I knew that son of a duck had gone."

No record

The throw didn't make it into the official record book because it came on the professional circuit.

The International Track Association scooped up many of the world's best athletes after the 1972 Olympic Games, paying prize money at a time when amateurism--or at least the appearance thereof--ruled the sport.

Oldfield, who had established an eccentric's reputation by smoking cigarettes between throws, became the association's No. 1 showman, serving up fire-breathing quotes and trashing the occasional hotel room.

But Jim Terrill, the ITA's operations director, said Oldfield's antics were mostly an act.

"He's a bright guy, and he realized that there were too many guys like [runner] Jim Ryun, who went to church and never swore, and that wasn't good copy," Terrill said.

Oldfield dreamed of earning \$1 million from his professional track career, and in the wake of his record toss, when he made the cover of Sports Illustrated and appeared on "The Tonight Show," it seemed an attainable goal.

But the ITA folded after only four years. Oldfield's pro stint yielded only about \$26,000.

End of the line

With the circuit a bust, Oldfield fought hard to regain his Olympic eligibility. He sued the U.S. Olympic Committee but wasn't cleared until the 1988 track and field trials, when he was 43 and past his prime. He finished ninth in what would be his last big competition.

Even then his body was breaking down. He had been born with a fragile back and bowed legs, and the heavy demands of training and competition led to injuries.

"He kept playing and playing, and it got worse," said his sister, Joan Junod of St. Charles. "He wanted his fame so bad that even though it hurt him, he wasn't going to stop."

Oldfield also acknowledged taking steroids, starting in college with Dianabol pills from a physician. But he

said he used the drugs sparingly and doubted they had harmed his health. His doctors, he said, never have raised steroids as an issue.

Starting in the early 1990s, Oldfield's disabilities piled up at a frightening clip. His right leg became severely infected after surgery, putting him on antibiotics for 17 months. A fusing spine ate away the strength in his upper body, while neuropathy, a nerve disorder, weakened his legs.

As his body deteriorated, Oldfield tried to make the switch to coaching but was ill suited for its administrative tasks. He halfheartedly earned his real estate license but never sold a house, saying with rueful sarcasm: "I don't like talking to people. It's beneath me."

For all of Oldfield's ferocity in the 7-foot throwing circle, he can be painfully sensitive outside it. To this day he feels the sting of ancient slights, from a teacher holding him out of a 3rd-grade field trip to a sportswriter labeling him a "cigarette-smoking wackadoo."

"All I ever wanted to do was to be liked," he said one afternoon in his condo, where he had turned off the lights to save money. "I don't like to be disliked. That used to cause me to fight people until I found out that they couldn't fight with me. So I hid from people. . . . That's why I don't mind living here [without] much contact with the outer world."

Every year, however, he emerges from the Leper Colony and drives seven hours to the pastoral hills of central Ohio, joining longtime friend and Olympic discus bronze medalist John Powell at a camp for young weight throwers.

It's a chance for him to pass on the knowledge he picked up the hard way, to feel like a living legend once more. Many of the campers can recite Oldfield's exploits by heart, like the time he reputedly dunked a 16-pound shot through a basketball hoop.

"He's amazing. It's sick," said James Fuentes, 24, of Columbus, Ohio.



Brian Oldfield watches Nick Radel of Columbus, Ohio, try to emulate Oldfield's spin technique during a practice session at Denison University in Ohio.

Photo for the Tribune by Jay LaPrete/AP

The Oldfield way

On a recent sun-bleached morning, Oldfield sat in his wheelchair under a shade tree, watching as the young throwers hoisted tires above their heads and tried to spin their way up a short, steep hill.

The drill, meant to improve balance and strength for the rotational style, often went badly. Oldfield is fiercely proud of his role in developing the technique--which some still call the Oldfield Spin--and his criticism could be withering. But he leavened it with enough self-deprecation to keep everyone smiling.

"[Spinning] was what I used to do in disco," he told one group. "I'd spin the girl around, spin her around, then I didn't have to buy her a drink and saved five bucks."

Mychelle Furlan, 15, of Johnston, Ohio, said Oldfield's needling kept the throwers loose.

"He's really down to earth, unlike every other coach," she said. "He likes what he does. You can tell when he threw he really loved doing it."

That old fire

That's why he never has been able to give it up and why he still thinks the shot put will be his way out of exile. In the next two months, Oldfield plans to introduce a multimedia Web site that he hopes will lead to a full-time job as an athletic consultant.

"He does know what he's doing," said Junod. "He could take [a thrower] right to the top. It would be his glory, even today, to do that."

Dan John, a friend of Oldfield's who coaches in Utah, said throwers can be captives of the past, haunted by the flaws that made their tosses--and their lives--less than perfect.

As Oldfield talked about his disappointments, however, the old defiance boiled to the surface, and he sounded like a guy finally ready to do a sado number on his ghosts.

"Why should I care what people think?" he bellowed. "This is what the [expletive] story is. Deal with it!"

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