

e-strengthsolutions Interview Questions for Brian Oldfield

Coach Oldfield, it's a real honor. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk shop. I want to focus our discussion on your ideas on how to best develop young throwers and also the role strength training plays in the development of your athletes. I also want to talk a little bit about your athletic career and how that may have shaped you as a coach and we'll wrap up with what you are up to these days in your coaching career.

Q: What initially attracted you to the throws? Did you play other sports in High School or College?

A: I started throwing the shot at Camp Edwards, a YMCA camp, at age 10. Every day at camp was dedicated to a different sport or activity, one of which was track and field. I won the shot, won the 50 yard dash, was second in the 100 yard dash, won the long jump, and generally did well in all events.

In Junior High, we were only allowed to throw the shot put, not the discus (the hammer and javelin were not then and are not now Illinois high school events). I could throw a baseball a long way, so I thought I could throw a shot a long way. If I hadn't started throwing the shot, I probably would have been a pitcher. I tried to emulate throwing the shot like a baseball, which was obviously bad technique. Unfortunately, I had no coach that knew otherwise, so I had to correct things myself as my experience grew.

I was taught to throw the shot put on my fingertips, almost like throwing a dart. My style was like a side step across the ring, a Fonville-like approach. When I got to high school, the Parry O'Brien style was popular. I converted to the O'Brien style, but never truly understood it. I was also introduced to the discus in high school. Besides track, I played football and wrestled in high school.

I didn't see the rotation style shot put until 1968 at the US Olympic Trials where John McGrath threw 61' 6" (McGrath was a 63' glider). I think I was the first person to go farther with the rotation than with the glide. I think that had a lot to do with my ability to throw the discus.

Q. You threw both disc and shot (and hammer and javelin) for some time in your career. You were a glide stylist initially in the shot, were you the first to use the spin style for the shot? What were some of the characteristics of the Oldfield spin that set it apart from other spin technicians? Are these characteristics useful to everyone, or did you find that they were really unique to your particular needs and maybe not appropriate to all throwers?

A: Using the left side of my body as a staple, not the right side, set my style apart from others. Like the discus position beginning outside the back of the ring, the initiation is with the left foot and then the pivot on the right. A good active, but soft left leg allows the thrower to extend or "climb" the left leg. This is similar to a pitcher or quarterback or anybody that throws anything far.

e-strengthsolutions Interview Questions for Brian Oldfield

I used the linear pathway, or backwards “7” through the circle so that it gave me the speed or drive across the circle then I lifted with the left side of my body at the front coming up and over, not rotating. I sprinted into and out of a rotation with the left side block.

Q: Who taught you the throws initially and at what point did you start to really develop and implement your own ideas about the mechanics and technique of the shot?

A: Initially, the people who taught me how to throw started me with the side step and the shot was held on my fingertips next to my Adams Apple. Basically, I was taught a very bad way to throw. As I watched others, my style began to mutate. I went from the fingertip dart throw to holding the shot behind the ear where it was more of a throw than a put, but if you look up, it's a put above the eyes. I learned how to apply my athletic ability into what was a remedial kind of push.

Q: For my readers who may be too young to remember or just not familiar with the shot, would you please place into an historical context the distances you were throwing the shot and how it compared to what the other men were doing at that time. Who were the other athletes and how far were they throwing?

A: In high school, I threw 58' 10" and 157'. I threw 58' 3" as a junior in HS, but the reason I didn't increase was I strained my back in wrestling. I finished 4th in the State Meet as a junior and won as a senior. I think I was about 10th in the country at that time. I threw similar distances in college.

After college, I began to improve largely by raising the level of competition. Before the 1972 Olympics, I was ranked 7th in the world. I found that focusing on my opponents really caused me to bear down in my training. I followed the old adage, “Yard by yard is hard, but inch by inch is a cinch”.

Q: What were some of your accomplishments in Highland Games?

A: The major thing that came out of the Highland Games was (a) becoming comfortable with the varying weights, sizes and shapes of the throwing implements (nothing was standardized) and (b) learning how to rotate on the grass. The grass was so slick, it forced me to improve my balance and timing.

I credit the improvement in the differential between my standing throw and my spin to the work on the grass. When I threw 75' in 1975, my differential was 9', but when I made my comeback in the 1980s, the differential grew to 12-14'.

e-strengthsolutions Interview Questions for Brian Oldfield

Q: My impression is that you were a very independent minded athlete and you did a lot on your own without a formal coach. Did you train often with other throwers and if so did you all “coach” each other?

A: I learned by doing athlete. I threw a lot and studied other throwers a lot. I moved to San Jose, which was the Mecca for throwers. There were at least six 21 meter throwers who spent considerable time in the San Jose area. I learned that Feuerbach and Woods were 65' throwers when they moved to the west coast and added 5' to their throws while there. My advantage was that I waited until I was a 70' thrower before I moved to the west coast and added my 5 feet. Every week there was a meet. Every Saturday we headed out to the gym and on the field with a food break in between.

Q: Do you think there is a particular kind of personality that is drawn to the throws? I'm curious about this because my experience coaching weightlifters (and being coached myself in WL) or strength training athletes in other sports seems to be a very different kind of coaching than what I experienced in team sports largely because the athlete's seem to have a different kind of mindset about training.

A: I chose throwing people to model myself after because many of them were professionals outside of track, bankers, dentists, marketing professionals, etc. in Europe and in the US. They were gifted independent thinkers. That was exactly what I wanted to be. I didn't want to be a blue collar thrower. I wanted to be CEO of my own life.

I weightlifted only to improve my throwing. After a lot of experimentation, I selected only those lifts, whether power lifts or Olympic lifts, that I knew from personal experience helped my throwing. The best of those involved a long range of motion, like power cleans and power snatches.

Q: My personal experience as a kid with organized team sports was pretty negative and it was largely due to the quality and personalities of the coaches I had available...as a result I was a pretty un-coachable kid. I did a lot of research and reading on my own and came to my own conclusions about things and it wasn't until young adulthood I realized that more individual events were where I belonged all along. This experience has really helped me be more flexible as a coach. Would you talk a little bit about how your experiences shaped your coaching style and philosophy?

A: I encountered a lot of people, my contemporaries, who didn't fit the team mold. Whether it started early in their lives or that was just the way they grew up, I don't know. I consider myself an un-socialized sociopath instead of a socialized sociopath. I can get along fine without team recognition. It was probably the reason I had difficulty in team sports, but was still driven to succeed and maximize my ability. I could always go to the gym and lift weights or go and throw. I didn't need someone to give me permission to train or compete. I could do anything I wanted to because it was my God given right.

e-strengthsolutions Interview Questions for Brian Oldfield

Q: What qualities make a good coach in your opinion?

A: First of all, a good coach must have the academia, a little experience and must understand the area he is coaching. In high school or earlier, a good coach could help a thrower make a decision about whether or be a glider or a spinner. This would be based on the kid's athleticism and ability to perform one of the techniques well.

As we move past high school, the coach must have an increasing range of experiences to apply to the thrower to fix problems and suggest the appropriate drills to improve technique and make movements more repeatable.

Q: Do you think that some athletes are just better suited for the glide and what factors would help an athlete or coach make the determination between the glide or spin styles?

A: In very general terms, stronger athletes could be gliders. More dynamic athletes, those better at jumping and sprinting, could be spinners. Spinning requires the athlete to stay on the balls of their feet throughout the throw. Being flat footed is not conducive to spinning.

Q: I really enjoyed the pre-Olympic training log you have posted on your website. Talk a little bit about the role weight training played in your career and what role you see weight training playing in developing a young thrower?

A: I organized all the elements of my training into categories. There were 40 categories. Weightlifting was a category. It had five key lifts, including power cleans, power snatches, bench press, incline press and push press. I believe the bread and butter lift of the shot put is the push press, driving up on the toes and fully extending over the eyes. The lift should be done in split fashion with the trailing leg being the drive leg for the thrower.

To improve the transition phase, I did a lot of drills. These drills included sprinting different lengths, single leg hops, double leg hops and alternating hops.

Q: Do you find there are any relationships between improving a particular weight training movement and improvements in performance in the ring?

A: In weight training, I learned from George Woods that there was a direct correlation between strength and throwing distance. I developed a formula that for gliders, every 20 pounds of additional weight in the overhead press or incline press, they would add one foot in distance. Being a rotational thrower, I found that every 15-16 pounds of additional weight would equate to an additional foot. I think high school throwers should expect to gain a foot in distance by increasing overhead strength an additional 12 pounds, assuming their technique is sound. These are just general guidelines. Given accurate measurements and continual testing, each person should be able to develop their own improvement ratios.

e-strengthsolutions Interview Questions for Brian Oldfield

Q: At what point do you think an athlete starts seeing diminishing returns from improving maximum strength levels and should restructure training time to simply maintaining strength levels while increasing focus on technique perfection? For example, I noticed in your old log that you worked up to a 395 lb Clean and Jerk, 410 Bench Press and 480 lb squat prior to the Olympics...after the Olympics, would increasing these particular lifts further have increased your results in the event or by that time were you really seeing improvements in performance mostly via refinements in your technique? (By the way, were those full clean and jerks or power clean and jerks?)

A: The log on my website had targets, some of which I didn't achieve. My actual strength levels pre-Olympics were: C&J – 365; BP – 400; Front Squat – 465 (3 reps); Push Press (off rack) – 450 (3 reps). At that time, my strength levels were low in comparison to other world class throwers. Ultimately, I could do a set of 10 front squats with 600 and back squats in a rack with 600 for 25 reps.

Q: You clearly were an explosive athlete: a 6'6" high jump, a 4.3 second 40 yard dash and a 10.3 second 100M. At 6'5" tall and 280 lbs these were and are just surreal accomplishments. There has been a debate for some time in the strength training community which has adherents to a theory on one side who say explosive athletes are genetically gifted with explosiveness and thus they gravitate towards events like the shot or Olympic Weightlifting and its more a matter of genetics than training effect that accounts for success. They just naturally excel at these sports. The other side takes a more middle approach and acknowledges that athletes gifted with explosive strength have an advantage in these sports but that they become even more explosive by training for these sports and that, in fact, explosiveness is a trainable expression of strength which even more modestly gifted athletes can improve upon by including explosive lifts, such as the Olympic lifts, in their training. Do you think that, for example, the inclusion of the Clean and Jerk in your own training helped your performance and did you do any other kinds of explosive movements for strength and conditioning? Another way to ask the question is, do you think your performance in the ring might have suffered if you didn't include some other kind of explosive lifting or movements?

A: I think some people are born hyper. I was always hyper. I don't know if that is genetic. I always walked on my toes; my heels never touched the ground. I admired the long jumpers and high jumpers because, among other things, they protected their heels. When I jumped, I protected my heel. That is probably why I was never a heel-toe thrower like Feuerbach. I was very explosive, perhaps as much as anyone, however, that can be damaging to muscles. I came to rely more on the stretch reflex. I think the best throwers will have a blend of strength and flexibility. Range of motion and stretch reflex help reduce injuries.

e-strengthsolutions Interview Questions for Brian Oldfield

I was a 65 foot thrower when I added Olympic lifts to my training. They helped me add 3 meters to my distance. If the ring would have been 8', not 7', I would still own the world record.

As I said before, the clean and jerk is the best lift for the shot put. I believe the snatch pull is the best for the discus.

Large throwers are severely confined by the size the ring. Randy Matson was 2" taller than me, but his shoulders were 4" higher. He was a very big man. Even his glide was confined by the ring. By the way, I'm glad he didn't become a spinner. If the ring was 8', it would allow taller throwers to compete more effectively. Now, a thrower of 6' 4" or 6' 3" is the optimum size. They fit the ring.

Q: Over the last 6 years I've added the old school kettlebell implement to my repertoire of training tools. Are you familiar with them and if so do you know any athletes or other coaches who are incorporating them into their training regimens?

A: I've used similar implements for years, including a 6" hammer, weighted balls and weight throw implements of varying weights. These all allow a wide variety of exercises that are very complimentary to throwing. They enable and enhance 3-dimensional motion and torque which are not fully achieved during normal weight training.

Q: What percentage of time is spent weight training vs. practicing the throws in the off season vs. pre-season vs. in-season training?

A: A lot can be done in the weight room. In the Midwest, I did rotation work and Olympic lifting on the platforms. I did my South Africans forwards and backwards. I simulated things I would do outside. The winters are a big detriment to throwers. That is why I moved to California and that is why throwers routinely pick up an additional 5 feet because they can continuously blend indoor weight training and outdoor throwing and exercise.

Q: Do you design weight training programs for your athletes?

A: This is not just a question of age, but also of maturity. While traveling throughout Europe, I learned that performing the lifts with broomsticks so that a sound technical base for lifting is established is a critical way for younger throwers to begin. These can be done for reps so that motor skills are developed. I don't think young lifters should be allowed to lift for single rep maximums. I think they need to be doing sets of 10, 15 or as many as 20 reps. They need more work on the motor skills than on how much weight they are lifting.

Q: You clearly loved your sport and I may be wrong, but as I read between the lines of the articles you've posted on your website, the love of your sport was the primary motivating factor behind your hard work and successes as an athlete and as a coach. Given your love

e-strengthsolutions Interview Questions for Brian Oldfield

for the event, how do you approach coaching a young thrower who maybe hasn't quite committed to the sport yet, whose motivation and performance may be dropping and may be there mostly because he has "enthusiastic" parents and/or school coaches?

A: I've learned through coaching other athletes who are younger that anybody can learn what I learned, as far as the concept goes, and I try to give it to them in simple terms because they may end up being a coach or an enlightened fan. I'm still looking for the person that is going to replace me. Randy Barnes came closest. I think it is possible to develop a cookie cutter approach to training that allows other athletes to enhance their ability through hard work. It is very difficult for high school age kids to make the leap from thinking of track as an after school activity to regarding it as a serious life goal or pursuit.

Q: I know you have been involved with the Powell Throwing Camps for awhile now and you are available for personal coaching services via your website. Do you produce any camps of your own? What coaching services are you offering and what is the best way to get in touch with you? Is there a minimum age or caliber of athlete you are willing to take on? Do you coach all the throws?

A: I've worked with John Powell at his training camps for 20 years. We put a lot of throwers on the map, both locally and internationally. I have run my own camps in the past, but I'm first and foremost a coach, not an administrator. Given that and the lack of reasonably priced facilities, it is a difficult process to undertake. Therefore, I want to continue to enhance my website with various aspects of throwing and training as well as coach individual athletes.

Coach Oldfield, I want to thank you again for taking the time to be interviewed and I want to wish you the best of success.