

Carl Lewis

Track & Field

by Carolyn Farb

At 21, Carl Lewis may be the greatest track athlete of all time. A master of the long jump, with a personal best of 28'9", Carl is the only man to have approached Bob Beamon's still unbroken 1968 record of 29'2½". Actually, Carl has cleared over 30', but the jump was disqualified over a much-disputed marginal foot fault.

A phenomenal sprinter, Carl Lewis speeds through 100 meters in 9.96 seconds and covered that distance faster than anyone in history in the final leg of the 4x100 meter relay at last year's Helsinki games. Videotapes show his time to have been an amazing 8.9 seconds.

Carl is also heading towards a record in the 200-meter dash. At the 1983 T.A.C. (The Athletics Congress) meet, the exuberant runner, anticipating his victory, threw his arms up in the air, pulling back slightly as he broke the tape at the finish line. His elation cost him a world record by 1/100th of a second.

A patriotic, born-again Christian, Carl is only one of a family of outstanding athletes, including his younger sister, Carol, the United States women's long jump champion.

Carolyn Farb spoke with Lewis in the library of her Texas home, later continuing the conversation at the University of Houston track where "the best American athlete since Jesse Owens" trains.

CAROLYN FARB: You and Mary Decker are strangely compared to one another.

CARL LEWIS: I think that Mary and I are linked together because we're somewhat unique. I am somehow in a position of following a hero in Jesse Owens and Mary Decker is something of a darling.

CF: How do you train?

CL: I train rather differently, I guess, because I spend two hours a day on it, eleven months a year. I train as a sprinter and a long jumper, so it is a very intricate but very interesting type of workout schedule. I usually work two days a week on my sprinting and two days a week on my jumping. I reserve Fridays for whichever one I didn't do as well in that week.

CF: How do you know when you do well? Is it when your coach says so or is it something you feel?

CL: It's something I feel, basically, because I think when a person does well at anything he tries, he feels a personal satisfaction. They realize they really worked hard for it and it's something they can recognize.

CF: Is there a special way you mentally prepare yourself for a race?

CL: I might be a little more low-key than most. I've never been the kind of person who has had to sit down and ponder the situation to psych myself up. I just feel a confidence in competition that comes from training well and having a good idea of what I'm doing. I have a sense of confidence because I've worked hard and I have a peace of mind and ease about competition so I don't have any secrets or do anything special.

CF: Do you look at your body as if it were a finely tuned machine? Do you have a little mental check-out that you do?

CL: I do in competition. Mainly because regardless of how finely tuned you are and how hard you work and how well you train, you're still going to make mistakes. You have to mentally check yourself and make sure you go over a list of things you must be ready to do—make sure you keep an idea of all the areas you want to stay involved in. That way you can keep the body as finely tuned as possible.

CF: Who encouraged you?

CL: I guess the encouragement came from my parents. They started a sports program in the town where I'm from in New Jersey, and they gave me the opportunity to start in track and field. My sister Carol and I got into the program as the years went by. It wasn't a situation where they pushed. I think they were a little reluctant to get us involved mainly because they were afraid of pushing.

CF: They didn't want you to be disappointed, perhaps.

CL: Exactly. They maybe held us back a little at the beginning, but Carol and I kept pushing and pushing and they just opened up things and let us get involved.

CF: They're both coaches, aren't they?

CL: Yes, they're coaches at rival high schools now. I remember one particular year when a meet was going on and it was very, very close. It came down to two events with my father's team leading by one point, and it just started to pour out of nowhere. They had to postpone the rest of the meet until the following Thursday. We were sitting in the house with my parents as rival coaches. There were no dinners cooked.

CF: How do you spend your free time, or don't you have any?

CL: I don't have a lot and I'm involved in Radio/Television at the University of Houston, so school takes up a lot of my time as well as some of the sports activities I mentioned earlier. Then just doing little tidbits here and there—I advertise for Xerox of Japan and BMW of America so that keeps me very busy and little things I do—speaking engagements and interviews like this one today—and I'm involved with muscular dystrophy... millions of things.

CF: Do you speak before many different groups?

CL: Yes. I've spoken before all types of groups and banquets and I'm also involved in Christian organizations.

CF: Do you have a lot of fan worship?

CL: I do and I think one thing is that I come from a typical situation. I was in sports at a very young age. Most people say that if you start at six or seven you burn out and your parents push you too hard. I was in that type of program and I went from nowhere to where I am right now. Until high school I was a small athlete, scrawny and a late bloomer. By being that way, I was able to see both sides of the coin. My sister was somewhat different. She was always out in the front, always won, always the best. I was totally the opposite. I think I was rather typical in that respect, and that's how people can relate to me—I always let my personality show.

CF: Your coaches speak very highly of you and say you're very easy to know and you'd be good at anything you did. Coach Doolittle described you as an "artist"—how do you react to that comment?

CL: Of course, I take it as a compliment because anyone who is respected must have a tremendous amount of confidence to do anything active as well as a lot of discipline and a lot of concentration. So I respect them very much—I've been here four years training under them and always gotten along very well with them. To hear the comments that they've made is very encouraging.

CF: What is the difference between a sprinter and a long distance runner?

CL: One difference, of course, is stamina—sprinters are just not born with the stamina. There are different types of muscle fibers in the body called "fast twitch" and "slow twitch." Fast twitch are sprint type of fibers where you get strength, quickness: football players, track

and basketball athletes, have them. Slow twitch are distance runners, swimmers in most cases, and others areas that require long distance and endurance type of training. That's one difference. It also takes two different types of minds. Distance runners work hard in one aspect—they work harder hours because they go out and do distance runs and a track workout which is very tough. Sprinters come out and have a short workout, which is very tough as well, because it's very fast but it's difficult. I think the main difference is that they're born with different types of muscle fibers.

CF: Is there something spiritual that makes you project?

CL: Yes, I think so. I am a very strong Christian, number one, and I think that one thing has helped me. I've only been a born again Christian three years, and it has given me peace of mind. Now I know that everything I do to the best of my ability is all I can do. The Lord has given me a talent in the area of track and field as well as other areas, and there's always improvement regardless of how old or young you are. As long as you let your personality show and try your best to improve and realize that the Lord is our main Being, giving us the strength to do it, I feel a lot more confident in my competition.

CF: Your sister, Carol, is an outstanding athlete. Is she a long jumper? Has she ever placed in 100-meter hurdling?

CL: Carol mainly dabbles with the hurdles just to have something else to do. She hasn't competed in any major hurdle competitions, but in the long jump, of course, she's been the national champion and was third in the World Championships, so she's really excelled. When there's nothing else to do, she may hurdle. When she competes for the University, she runs a conference meet, in the hurdles, but she doesn't like them that much. She just likes something to do and it is an event closely related to the long jump.

CF: Did she make the Olympic team?

CL: She made the Olympic team in 1980—she was the youngest member at 16.

CF: I understand you have other interests—that you collect crystal and silver.

CL: Yes. I've been to Europe eight times and the idea of crystal always intrigued me. Three years ago I went with my agent; he has always collected crystal and red wines, so one year we went out looking at crystal. It was interesting to see the ideas in crystal glass, so from that point on I started getting different pieces and reading up on it and learning about the different ideas. I graduated into silver and it's been an interesting hobby because I get to go to Europe so frequently. I've had a good time.

CF: When you come home it's like your refuge from the world.

CL: Exactly.

CF: How do you handle pressure at your level of competition?

CL: I guess it all goes back to confidence. I go into a competition and since I have a clear idea of competing at a certain level and in a certain area, then I'm going to be at the top of the ball game with the best people. Since I've been number one I go as hard as anyone else.

CF: To make sure you keep your goals or meet even higher ones?

CL: Yes. Two years ago I was number one in the world, and if I had run the exact same times, I would probably have been third or fourth in the 100 meters and second in the long jump. People are coming as fast as I'm going, so I have to be a little bit

faster. It's like a cycle. The person who gets to the top must keep improving and when they get to a point or an age where they can't improve anymore, then they step down and someone else comes up from behind. It always works that way.

CF: It works both ways and you have to protect yourself in a certain way. The N.C.A.A. rule does not permit funding but now isn't it legal to receive funding in a trust through The Athletics Congress?

CL: That's correct. The N.C.A.A. rule prohibits strongly and strictly an athlete making any type of money, so an athlete like myself, let's say I was on a scholarship, would be getting x number of dollars in scholarship money. Let's say I stay in the dorms. My room and board and tuition are paid for and I get \$20 a month to live on. That's what a typical full-scholarship athlete gets. If I were to decide I wanted to go out and get a part-time job—say my season is during the spring and I wanted a part-time job and a friend would give me a job to work September, October, November and December for the off season—well that's not allowed under the N.C.A.A. rules because they say you're earning money under the University so you're not allowed to make any money yourself. The Athletics Congress is the governing body of track and field, excluding the N.C.A.A., and they allow advertising and basically anything a professional can do—even prize money at certain track meets now. But it has to go into a trust fund.

CF: So T.A.C. is more directly related to the running community?

CL: Yes, the running community in amateur athletics. The N.C.A.A. does not allow you to make any money outside of the tuition, room and board and \$20 a month the university pays you. That's why there's so many problems with collegiate athletes. Like in football they have a system where the N.F.L. cannot intrude into the collegiate system. But now the players are saying, "How can we live for four years on a simple scholarship?" Track and field athletes did not have that problem before because track and field were not making any money. Now that they're getting attention and starting to make money there's a problem. So athletes are starting to leave universities and run amateur. Once they're where they could be world class, they may leave track and field and join basketball. They're starting to become younger and younger, and now football is going to start so the N.C.A.A. is going to have to change their rules or they'll lose too many athletes.

CF: I was going to ask you about the recent steroid controversy.

CL: I think the philosophy I have is that, when I was young, I was exposed to steroids, that is I'd heard about them. When I was out of high school I heard that they were testing for steroids and I said, "What is this?" The coach told me that, in my event, it didn't make much of a difference. They might make you stronger or a little bit faster, but the person who is doing things correctly is going to beat a person on drugs who is doing it incorrectly. If you make mistakes, you might be a little bit stronger, but you're going to make mistakes anyway. I don't necessarily believe in them because I don't think they help that much. But, as I stated before, if someone decides to take steroids or any drug, that is their responsibility. I don't think it's right or good but...

CF: You're not sitting in judgement.

CL: Exactly. Anyone can do what they want to do. Who am I to judge? □

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