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'. 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 9.9 seconds. Videotapes show his time to have been an amazing 8.9 seconds.

Carl is also heading towards record in the 200-meter dash. At the 1983 T.A.C. (The Athletics Congress) meet, the ember under the lights lit up as Carl ran down the track, his arms up in the air, pulling back slightly, as he broke the tape at the finish line. His elation was matched by a world record by 1/100th of a second.

A patriotic, born-again Christian, Carl is only one of a family of notable 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 interview at the University of Houston track center where "the best American athlete since Jesse Owens" trains.

CAROLYN FARB: You and Mary Decker are strangely compared to one another. C. L.: I think that’s because we have so many things in common. You and I are both of the same generation, and we both linked together because we’re somewhat unique. I am somewhat in a position of following in your footsteps, and I don’t think that Mary Decker is something of a darling.

C. L.: How do you train?

C. L.: I train rather differently, I guess, because I spend two hours a day out, eleven months a year. I train as a sprinter and a long jumper, so it is a very intimate but very intense four-hour-a-day schedule. Usually I work two days a week on my sprinting and two days a week on my jumps. I had a very simple week, too, during which one did not do as well as in the next week.

C. L.: How do you know when you do well? Is it 28’9” or do you have a way of knowing whether it is something you feel?

C. L.: It’s something I feel, basically, because I can do anything, but no one expects you to stay anything he tries, he feels a personal satisfaction. They realize they really worked hard for it and it’s something they can recognize.

C. L.: Is there a special way you mentally prepare yourself for a race?

C. L.: I might be a little more low-key than most. I’ve never been the kind of person who has to sit down and pontificate to the situation to psych myself up. I just feel a confidence in competition that comes from tradition 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 sense of what is going on. It’s a matter of preparation and just making sure you go over a list of things you must be ready to do—make sure you keep an idea of all the things you want to stay involved in. That way you can keep the body as finely tuned as possible.

C. L.: Who encouraged you?

C. L.: I think the encouragement came from my parents. They started a sports program in our backyard, and they gave me the opportunity to start in track and field. My sister Carol and I got into the program around the fourth or fifth year. 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.

C. L.: They didn’t want you to be disappointed, perhaps.

C. L.: Exactly. They might hold us back a little at the beginning, but Carol and I kept pushing and pushing and we just opened up and let us get involved.

C. L.: They’re both coaches, aren’t they?

C. L.: Yes, they’re coaches at rival high schools. I recognize one of my oldest friends, my coach, as the man who has had the biggest influence on me.

C. L.: How do you spend your free time, or don’t you have any?

C. L.: Yes, I’ve spent a lot of time in Radio/Television at the University of Houston, so school takes up a lot of my time. I’m also involved in the sports activities. I mentioned earlier. Then just doing little tidbits here and there—I advertise for Xerox, I advertise for Tupperware and BSA of America so that keeps me very busy and little things I do—speaking engagements and interviews like this. The most that I’m involved with is muscular dystrophy... millions of millions.

C. L.: Do you speak before many different groups?

C. L.: Yes. I’ve spoken before all types of groups and banquets and I’m also involved in the local community and I’m involved with the national championship and the third in the World Championships, so she’s really excellent. When there’s nothing else to do, she can hustle. When she competes for the University, she runs a conference meet, in the hurdles, but she doesn’t like the fact that she has to do it. She likes something else to do. She hasn’t competed in any major hurdle competitions, but in the long jump, of course. I was the only national champion to compete in the World Championships, so she’s really excellent.

C. L.: Why do you have other interests—that you collect crystal and silver.

C. L.: Yes. I’ve been to Europe eight times in the last ten years. I’m a collector of crystal and silver. It is interesting to see the ideas in crystal glass, so that from 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 interesting. It’s been an interesting hobby because I get to go to Europe so frequently. I’ve had a good time. When you come home it’s like your refuge from the world.

C. L.: Is there a way you handle pressure at your level of competition?

C. L.: I think 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 as close to being in the ball game as someone else. People since I’ve been number one I go as hard as anyone else.

C. L.: To make sure you keep your goals or do you have other ones?

C. L.: Yes. Two years ago I was number one in the world, and if I had run the exact same time, 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 where they can’t improve anymore, then they step down and someone else comes up from behind. It always works that way.