

Interview With Tony Naclerio

Tony Naclerio—Educator; High School, Collegiate, National, International Coach; Olympic Development Chairman—Throws 1972-1996; Olympic Throws Coach—1996. Editor Russ Ebbets talks with one of this country's coaching authorities.



1. Tony, what are you doing these days?

After 47 years in secondary education, I am now retired from the high school. My career in education started with All Hallows High School, Essex Catholic High School and then Morris Hills High School. Presently, however, I am still coaching at Rutgers University in New

Jersey. I am starting my 21st year at the University. I am also continuing Olympic Development of the grass roots by running clinics for high school and college athletes and coaches. I'm also working with young grammar school athletes who have the motivation to be throwers on the highest levels.

2. How did you get started coaching?

I was a member of a religious order, the Christian Brothers, dedicated to educating young men. I had a burning desire to help young people not only in the classroom but to take the classroom to the playing field. I myself played football and baseball and dabbled in the throws. I was given the opportunity to coach football, indoor and outdoor track and field. I brought as much passion as I could to the three sports. I spent 20 years in the order and left in 1975 to take care of my mother who had a stroke and was living in

the Bronx, New York.

3. Who were some of your early coaching influences?

I had some close friends in my age group that had an influence on me. Tom Pagan, hammer thrower and the throws coach for the 1988 Olympics, together with Al Oerter, four-time Olympic gold medal winner, were instrumental in my motivation for the throws.

4. You coached at Essex Catholic in New Jersey, a team that produced both Mark Muzro (national high school record holder in the javelin) and Marty Liquori on the same team. How tough was it for the #3 athlete to get some press?

At Essex Catholic High School, we were privileged to have extremely motivated athletes. I tried to encourage Mark Muzro as a freshman to play football. His response was that he would put all his energy into the javelin. I knew

By Russ Ebbets

he was special from that moment. He became aware of the javelin as a young 14-year-old on the way home from school. He would cut through the Newark City Stadium. The athletes would yell to him to pick up their javelin. He then would pick up the javelin and toss it back to them achieving their distance. He also had the ability to throw rocks. He was able to pick out windows at a high level and make contact. He was known as a 10-story man. He later broke Terry Bradshaw's national record with a toss of 252'8". In college he made the 1968 Olympic team and was the first American to throw 300'. Marty Liquori was also a member of that high school team and made the 1968 Olympic team in Mexico as well. He was the third high school athlete to break the four-minute barrier. These two athletes brought a lot of attention track and field so the other athletes were able to get their pass.

5. What was the training environment like at Essex? Both you and Fred Dwyer have had legendary high school and collegiate careers, you at Iona and Rutgers and Dwyer at Manhattan. How much contact did you have with each other? Did you share training ideas? Or did you operate independently?

The training environment at Essex Catholic was extremely unique. We were an urban school. We did not have a real training facility. Fred Dwyer and I were very creative in finding places to practice. I know Fred drew up a track at the local park and that was our training area for runners. Later on, we were able to restore an old wooden track and set it up behind the school. Our sprinters and hurdlers used to work in our huge corridors. I worked with the hurdlers at that time. The throwers worked at an old concrete park-

ing lot these blocks from the school. We made four rings with concrete toe boards. Our rings were labeled beginner, intermediate, varsity and Oh My God! We brought in some dirt so that an old javelin could be thrown over the wires. The entrance of the lot had a dirt hill where the javelin young men would snap into the hill at targets while they waited their turn to throw. During the winter, we threw the shot in the boiler room. Fred and I worked apart and came together at meets and shared strategy with each other.

6. You probably competed and started coaching when weight training was either discouraged or frowned upon. How did you get past those doubters and their criticism?

During the 1960's at Essex Catholic High School, we cleaned out a huge room in the basement of the school which had been the Mutual Insurance Building. We ran bench-a-thons to earn money to create a solid weight room. In those days, we worked with Burr plates, six-foot bars and dumbbells. These were no Olympic bars and thus the early lifts did not include the clean and jerk and the snatch. Our room was spartan and athletes would work with incredible motivation. While the weights were going on, we had an area with mirrors where the shot putters would work endlessly perfecting their technique. This was true also for the discus and javelin. In this room we had a huge board of records for the throwers and for the lifts on every level. We even had records for runners. The runners were slow to buy into the strength training yet Marty Liquori did a wonderful job developing his strength levels. The alumni would come back and have contests with the athletes in the room which

brought further enthusiasm. Yes, there were doubters, but soon afterward everyone was buying into the weight room.

7. It is a lifetime distinction for a high school coach to produce one 60-foot thrower, yet you managed to produce three in one year—how did that come about?

Excellence was always in the minds of our young men. I would always encourage our football players to go out for another sport especially track and field. Everything they wanted was in our program—speed, flexibility and strength. Early on, our records were very high. Our freshman 8 lb. record was 60 feet. Our early cluster had athletes all over 50 feet. Then their desire and pursuit of goals gave birth to a number of 60-footers, culminating with a 66'4" performance by Rudy Gurvara. At that time it was the second best performance in state history. From there it was setting national shot-put records for four men on a relay. We broke the national record three times for the four-man shot put relay. I think the letter still stands as the national record. They just would motivate each other to throw far.

8. How do you determine if a youngster shows promise in the throws?

When recruiting throwers, you need to pursue the best athletes you can find. Unlike what others think, it is not just for the overweight youngster. Throwers are fast, athletic, flexible and strong. Then there is the mental factor. Make sure the athlete wants to throw and is not there only to benefit his/her other sport.

9. Did you ever use physical testing to identify throwers or did you more look for body type profiles—

or a combination of both?

There was some physical testing involved with finding throwers—box running and drills to determine the speed and agility of the athletes' feet. Of course, levers come into consideration. It is great when you find an athlete who is tall with long levers and has other attributes.

10. What do you feel is the biggest change you have made in your coaching career in terms of methodology or how you approach the sport?

I think I have maintained my philosophy over my 50 years of coaching. You must love what you are doing and always remember that coaching is being an impact person in the lives of the athletes you are privileged to coach. Your impact as a coach is incalculable if you are there for the right reasons. I have always been the teacher so I prepare my workouts each day for each event. As you develop as a coach, you learn from your athletes and you should always remain open to new ideas and technical changes (rotational shot put). As you grow as a coach your eye shutters become better. You see things in a technique and you can deliver the information to the athlete. Always use film so the athlete can see what you are trying to accomplish.

TRAINING

11. What is the training sequence you use to get a thrower started? I'm assuming you use the shot first then go to the discus.

The training sequence is definitely starting with the shot put and then going to the discus. The javelin usually stands alone. The training, however, prior to technique is usually geared to promote

fast feet, speed, flexibility and explosion. Fun drills usually include some spinning drills to determine whether an athlete would embrace the glide or rotational method.

12. Let's stay with the shot. Where do you begin? With footwork, shot release, trunk position or something else?

When starting the shot put, always go from the known to the unknown. I usually start with the standing throw; however, use the word punch to bring home the explosiveness of the throw. I would set up visualizations for the athletes. (Example—There is a 7-foot man coming to your left side. Have the athlete stand sideways with left arm extended. He is bent on destroying you with an iron bar. When he arrives at your left fingertips, I will yell punch! Normally because of the height of the would-be enemy, all punches are usually high. Then you can add lower body beats the upper body and punch. Then add punch with your thumb down, then turn your shoulders back, then add pulling your left arm back to your left side and create a blocking sensation with your left side. With each command, the athlete sees how the power comes into the shot put.

13. With respect to the glide v. the rotation, do you start everyone with the glide or do you teach the glide and let him or her "grow into it."

I would work with the glide first and set up all the biomechanical correctness of the throw. As you progress, always include drills that allow the athlete to spin and do rotational movement. This can be done on the lines of the track. As time progresses, you can suggest early who might embrace the rotational technique.

14. Pick two throwing events and briefly detail three fundamental things that need to be mastered before one can continue to improve.

In the glide shot, the athlete must master snapping the right leg under the body midway to the toe board. The right foot should land parallel. The shoulders of the athlete must stay even and well over the right leg. At the middle, the shot should be over the right heel. The next thing to be mastered is to allow the hips to get in front of the explosion. Then to strike against a beaced left leg and release high.

In the rotational shot, you need to establish the run first to the toe board. Then you must master looking at the ball, holding back as the right foot snaps to 360 degrees and continuing to move. The last major rule to understand is that the rotational release is high and both legs lift, like a front squat.

15. How much aerobic development do you feel is necessary from a general fitness or health standpoint? What recommendations do you make regarding aerobic work—jogging, hiking, circuits, pool work or something else?

For the younger athlete, general fitness is important. Try to make the athlete as athletic as possible. Work with your environment and be creative.

16. Did you routinely do much circuit training? What type did you do? At what point in the season?

Starting as early as possible, I would put in circuits that would generate enthusiasm and passion. (The box run, up and down hills, medicine ball exercises, flexibility drills, explosive running, jump rope, sprints and light plyos!)

17. What about plyometrics for the arms and legs? Did you do much of this with high schoolers? How did you introduce this without producing injury?

When approaching youngsters regarding plyometrics, you need to proceed with caution. I use med balls, weights, jump rope, rapid step-ups, triple jump drills on grass, many times up hill. Always listen to your athletes and make it fun.

18. Proprioceptive balance plays a critical role in all throws. How did you address this quality in training?

Proprioceptive balance is extremely important on every level. As part of your stretching routine and single-support balance drills (quick directional runs, right, left, straight ahead and over low hurdles). In the weight room add some balance training doing some single-support lifts. Lighter weights should be used.

19. What type of seasonal planning or periodization models did you use? How many training phases were in a yearly cycle or how did you break up training?

On the high school level, you have to be extremely creative since your athletes are coming from different sports and different times. Find out what was done in these athletes' sports and create a plan for getting these athletes to perform on a high level. On the college level when the athlete is full time in track & field, you can break up the field training and weight room via periodization. In the fall, on-field training would include stretching, light plyos, medicine balls, step-ups for speed, sprints, fast-feet drills, etc. The weight room should reflect the same preparation. Early endurance, lifting, into power and speed

lifting as you approach the indoor season. Following the indoor season, rebuild on and off the field and prepare to peak at your major meets. You want your athletes fresh and explosive when it really counts.

20. What were your goals for the athlete's off-season?

In the off-season, you want the athlete to rest while staying fit. Following a good rest, the athlete should approach the weight room with enthusiasm. I would encourage each athlete to do the drills that would correct his/her individual technical problems.

21. What drills do you use to develop explosive power?

Explosive power for the high school, collegiate and elite athlete is crucially important. I like the explosive med ball drills, explosive presses, cleans, clean and jerks and snatches as well as squats, front squats, hack squats and step-ups.

22. Footwork is a critical component in the hammer but also plays a central role in the other throws. What drills or exercises did you do to insure your throwers were agile and quick on their feet?

Quick feet, agility and rhythm are extremely important for all throwing events. I'm always yelling to the athletes, "Hear the music." I do wide box running, challenging the athletes to do different body movements in quick and rhythmical fashion. We do lots of drills to develop quick feet. (Run quickly over rope ladders staying on the balls of the feet, small box runs, front scoop, carioca, backward run extremely fast.)

23. How do you develop core stability?

We do a half hour of med ball

drills at most practices targeting the core muscles. (Back-to-back exchanges, sit-ups firing the med ball. Moving the med ball side to side as you sit holding legs off the floor. Walk and torque drills as well as layout on the plyo boxes.)

24. Regarding core stability, the Russians taught that one's strength and power comes from what we'd call the lower core—the hips and glutes. Americans tend to focus more on the chest and shoulders (maybe due to the body building influence). Did you address this distinction in training? If so, how?

I believe that we have been influenced here in the USA that stronger is better. If you lift this much you will throw this distance. I never believed this to be true. Many athletes get extremely strong and sacrifice athletic performance. They lose their length. All of the throwing events start from the lower body, the lower core, hips and glutes. You need an explosive injection given to you by the plant leg. In the early stages of my career, I bought into that philosophy. I had a high school senior bench 420 lbs. Soon afterward I realized that explosive athleticism would bring greater results.

25. One of the problems that plagues young baseball pitchers is that Little League stars rarely succeed at the higher levels due to injury. Rotator cuff and elbow injuries have proven to be the end of many javelin careers. Mark Murro was both a high school champion and the first American to throw over 300'. How did you protect and prepare his arm in his early years?

Rotator cuff and elbow injuries have always been a problem for javelin athletes. I can't tell you how

many young ladies come into college with rotator cuff tears. You, as the coach, must make sure that the athlete is throwing correctly to avoid injury. We always stress elbow exercises and surgical tube stretching for the shoulder. The proper stroke of the javelin off a proper base will protect the athlete. The baseball influence of short-arm throwers has to be eliminated. The javelin is a long pull of the spear, delivered in a pronated release. I stress patience to my javelin throwers to allow the lower body to work. Then we want a long pull over a braced left leg. The release is high and the follow or chase should see the armpit of the throwing arm over the left leg.

Mark Murro had an elbow injury as a sophomore in high school. Bone chips were removed and he then focused on release. He threw an enormous amount of throws over 244 feet and the national record of 252'8". Later in college he hit the 300-foot marker.

26. Staying with the javelin. The plant knee must withstand a tremendous torque force or counter-rotation force with each throw. Did you recommend any special spike pattern for the javelin boot that would allow the foot to pivot on the runway approach rather than torque the knee?

Special spike patterns are important. For the high school athlete who usually throws on grass it is important to have the largest spikes on the left heel. The right shoe should go with smaller spikes. On the college level, most performances are on rubberized runways. They, of course, have limitations on the size of spike. Individuals should prepare the right shoe depending on the quality of their technique.

27. Overtraining has recently been

divided into two classifications—neural, seen in speed and power events, and metabolic, seen in the endurance events. An older coach once advised me not to let my throwers throw too much, particularly the 35# weight as they would, "throw themselves out," what we've come to call neural overtraining. How did you avoid overtraining with your throwers?

When dealing with young throwers, this is a vital area. When you listen to Olympic athletes, they speak in terms of thousands of throws during the year. I always made my athletes understand that these athletes are extremely strong and are not to be imitated. The coach should keep a record of throws for each event each day. Record drill throws versus intense throws. This way you can channel your preparation for meets. The athlete should never feel tired at a meet from his practices. I learned this lesson many years ago. A shot putter in high school had to go away for a week to a funeral in the south. When he returned, he threw three feet farther. It was then I realized the value of rest.

28. Could you detail the set-up of a mid-week medium or hard throwing day?

If you are pre-season, I like to mix the weight of the shot put, heavy to light, light to heavy. We usually throw three days a week. During the season, the throws come down: early week, up to 15 to 20 throws; mid-week, more intense, stress on technique usually 10 throws; at the end of the week, technical movement. You can throw a bit more with the discus.

The javelin is a different animal. On the younger level especially, you need to constantly work on technique. The use of med ball

rotational throws, weighted balls, light balls, can serve you well. Monitor the amount of throws with the javelin.

29. I once heard George Dunn lecture on the shot where he stated that his throwers never threw without him being in attendance, giving input. How have you handled feedback? And has it changed with the technological advances of the last few decades (Dartfish, video cameras and video phones, etc.)?

I am a firm believer that the coach is always present when throws are being taken. While you are at the shot put, you prepare a workout for the javelin people that does not include throwing. When you get to the javelin, they will be ready to throw. Film at least once a week prior to the season. Listen to your athlete and make him or her become part of the analysis of their technique.

30. What pre-season lifts or exercises did you do?

Pre-season lifts attempt to work on overall body strength. This would be a great preparation for the Olympic lifts to follow.

31. At what point in a thrower's career does doing the shot/discus/hammer combination become counterproductive?

The more elite the athlete the harder it becomes to work combinations. On the college level, you should focus on what is best for the athlete to excel. Then for team points you could add a third event.

32. Pick two of the throws—at the elite level what are two areas you feel elite throwers have the greatest difficulty mastering?

I think on the elite level there is a tremendous balance that has

to take place between strength and technique and real athleticism. I think this is hard to master. It demands a real knowledge of self.

33. What is one mistake you see coaches consistently making that you feel is detrimental to development.

In all throws we need to attract coaches who have a passion for the sport and want to teach and constantly get better no matter what year of coaching they are in. They must put the athlete first. The big mistake is not setting technical goals for each practice so that the athletes can reach their full potential.

GENERAL

34. Stephanie Brown Trafton had a panoramic picture of the Olympic Stadium constructed in her garage and spent the pre-Olympic year "throwing" in the stadium. She nailed her first throw and made the world play catch-up, which they never did. From a psychological standpoint how do you like your athletes to approach a competition? Have you use scripts? What mental cues do they use to get on or stay on track?

This is a very important aspect of competition. I always tried to instill in my athletes the confidence in their technique to throw far. Before entering the ring, I encourage the athlete to visualize their performance. Once the athlete steps into the ring, everything should just flow into the explosion.

35. In a six-throw competition do you have goals for each throw or was there a priority on crushing an early throw?

In a major competition, the warm-up should talk to the athlete.

The technical adjustments are made at this time. The athlete should try to win the competition on his first throw.

36. How many warm-up throws would you recommend? And at what point do they become counterproductive?

Each athlete is an individual. Each day brings different physical circumstances. Once the athlete feels his or her technique is ready, stop immediately and think of the first competitive throw.

37. What are the biggest differences between coaching men and women?

I have always coached men and women together. You should approach the training methods, with understanding of physical differences. Being extremely positive goes a long way in making progress. When approaching the technical material, men and women work well together.

38. How did you handle fouling? Please speak from a practice perspective and in competition.

Fouling should never be a problem if the technique works. Many times, if introducing something new in the rotational shot or discus, I would work away from the toe board. This brings confidence in establishing the explosive run. Once the technique is understood the toe board becomes a friend.

39. The shot put generates the greatest horsepower of any human physical endeavor. Any other trivia or historical data on the throws that you've always marveled at?

As the years progressed, I've seen athletes throw far with better technique over enormous power. Your technique should always take

precedence over strength. You are an athlete first and a weight lifter second.

40. The American High School record in the javelin was set in November, 1988, by Tommi Viskari, from New York, a state that does not contest the sport. How did that come about?

Tommi Viskari was an exchange student to the U.S. He was one of Finland's elite junior throwers. When he arrived in Schenectady, New York, his home family contacted me. I met with the family and made him a part of my Fall Olympic development clinic program. He competed alongside many athletes as well as elite athletes Al Oerter, Art Swarts, etc. His big throw came at West Point at one of my Olympic development fall meets. When he prepared to return to Finland I met his family over dinner. He wanted to go to school in the U.S.; however, he sustained a back injury while training in Finland which kept him from performing.

41. Any other unusual or outstanding things you've seen in your coaching career in either a practice setting or at a meet?

I've seen a lot of great moments in the throws over my 50 years. I feel two Mark Muro stories stand out, one in high school and one in college. On his way to a tune-up meet before the New Jersey state championship, we were heading to Dover, New Jersey, via Route 46. It was slow and we were late. As we drew near, he heard his name called, jumped over a barbed-wired fence carrying his shoes and a six-foot Burr bar. I proceeded to park the car. Everyone was jumping up and down as I entered the arena. Without warm-up, Mark's first throw was again a national record

of 252'8". I missed the throw. Later in the competition, he threw three throws out of sector over 265 feet. In a college meet at the Coliseum in California, Mark unleashed a throw that went through the sector flags, turned right and landed at the start of the 200-meter dash. The throw was enormous and would have been the world record. It was disallowed by a sector call by the toe board referee.

42. Traditionally the U.S. has been dominant in the shot internationally. While there have been moments of glory, U.S. success in the hammer, discus and javelin pales when compared with the shot—why is this so?

The shot put in this country has always been excellent. We have an enormous base in high school and college throwing. When it comes to the other events, particularly the hammer and javelin, we lack the grass-root base. Very few states throw the javelin and many of our talented throwing athletes are playing baseball and football. In the hammer, we have just a few states and some pockets of hammer throwing areas. Yet, we have some real talented young people who started very young with a hammer mentor. Walter Henning who was tutored by Marty Engel and Concor McCullough who was tutored by his dad, a great hammer thrower at Boston University. We also have this in the discus and the javelin.

43. You have certainly been one of the great innovators in the throwing events in the sport—where and whom did/do you get your ideas from?

As an educator, I have always looked for new and innovative ideas. At the Olympics in 1968, I was able to converse with many

European coaches and shared ideas. I feel this was my springboard in the throwing events.

44. Any books or readings you'd recommend?

I really feel that my book, *The Teaching Progressions of the Shot Put, Discus and Javelin*, is a perfect book for those who really want to teach the events. It comes with videos of on-field teaching of groups. There is also a safety tape that shows the drills athletes can do while the coach is coming from another ring. Check out my website, www.tonymacferio.com, for information on material, grass-root clinics, etc.

45. What do you see as your "best day" or fondest memory from coaching?

I've always been a grass-root guy and believe that finding the motivated and dedicated young person early can materialize into great things. This happened with Mark Murro and recently occurred with me and a family I knew for many years. They brought their young son in sixth grade and asked to help develop him as a thrower. He had all the ingredients necessary to take on this challenge. I worked with him as a young athlete in the rotational shot put. When he approached eighth grade, he was skilled and able to throw far. As a 15-year-old freshman, this athlete [Nick Vena of Morristown, NJ] threw 66'7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " indoors and 67'10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " outdoors. As a sophomore, he threw 70'5" indoors and 72'8" outdoors. His discus is in the 180' range. He has broken the national freshman and sophomore records for the shot put. He is a student of the sport and attends all of my development clinics now as a high school student. This success story is a top memory for me and proves that technique early coupled

with proper passion and motivation produces great success. I implore all coaches, especially on the lower levels to find this kind of athlete and get as much help as possible.

46. Any last comments or advice on the throws or to throwers?

Remember, throwers, that each and every one of you is unique. Look and seek advice from coaches and elite throwers; yet, never forget that there is no other you. You can never be Al Oerter, yet you can be you and achieve great things. This is one moment in time for you: Capture the moment and take it as far as humanly possible. I wish you happiness, health and success. To the coaches, I leave with you a quote from the philosopher, Goethe. "I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make a life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a person humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming." God love you always.

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