

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

1. Brian, where do you live now?

I live in Elgin, Illinois, a Western suburb of Chicago. Chicago may be the home for the 2016 Olympic Games.

2. About the Spin: Did you invent it by yourself or did you see this technique somewhere? Did you get some videos/pictures of Alexandr Baryshnikov or Rolf Osterreich in the 70ies?

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. My ability to jump and sprint later became an integral part of my training.

I learned to throw the shot rotationally by watching John McGrath. John was a UCLA athlete. Tom Telez, best known as Carl Lewis' coach, also helped me. Tom said he had worked with rotational shot putting as early as 1953.

3. Why did you start with the spin technique - did you expect better results when you started to use this technique?

I did expect better results from the spin. Unfortunately, shortly after my conversion, I tore cartilage in my knee while throwing the discus. I had thrown over 72 feet during the shot put portion of my training. I took a break, came back, didn't warm up properly, and during a throw, planted my heel. This caused a medial meniscus tear. I should have stayed on the balls of my feet and continued to rotate.

4. When did you start to use it in training, what was your first competition result / date with the new technique?

I opened 1974 throwing 68'. The night after the tear, I competed in a meet and threw only 66' 1". The pain was unbearable. I ended up in a brace from my hip to my ankle.

5. What was your best competition throw with the glide technique?

The previous year, I threw an indoor world record of 70' 10 1/2" as a glider.

6. Your technique was modified, when I watch today's US-Spinners. What are the major differences?

I was aided in my technique by the fact I was also a high jumper. I was predominantly a left leg jumper with the Western Roll. When you weigh 280 pounds and are jumping 2 M, this requires a really good blocking step.

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

Throwing with the brace on my right leg, I called it tricking the right knee, tricking the right toe, caused me to be able to make a complete rotation in the ring. The toes need to point toward the landing area. I think this was the most distinct thing I did as a thrower.

The throwers today have a tendency to be right hand/right foot coordinated. They like to use the style of a glider with a dominant right foot. They torque at the back of the circle, however, the torque is needed at the middle of the circle. Before they take off with the left foot at the back of the circle, the ball has already pushed in front of the hip instead of being behind the hip. The separation is less pronounced.

7. Do you think there are improvements which would have helped you also, or does it depend on the athlete's type?

The improvement that would have helped me is having a longer season. Regarding athlete type, having sprinting and jumping abilities is very helpful for throwers. I was doing 40 yard sprints, like football players. I was timed in 4.3 using blocks on a track... a competitive situation.

8. At 1.96 Meters you were very tall for the spin technique - was this a handicap?

At 6' 5", I was not too tall for the spin and what came in handy for my height was remembering the Perry O'Brien "J" position. That means driving down to the front of the circle and overcoming my linear drive with my lift. Michael Carter said he always tried to emulate my drive and my lift which is a compliment from the Silver Medalist at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

9. Which athlete do you think uses today a spin technique which comes closest to yours?

I think Randy Barnes was the closest of all the rotational throwers. Specifically, his indoor world record throw was technically his best throw ever. Today, Reese Hoffa would be the closest. I don't understand what happened to Reese at the Games. It seems to me that when you get ready to move to the next level, you emotionally move back to that drive level that you had when you got going. You enter a non-sophisticated state. You make a mistake that you would have made earlier, but at a higher level. He goes back to 67'. I think Reese needs to rebuild. I look forward to him being able to compete beyond 23M.

10. Do you think one of the current US-Throwers have a chance for the World Record?

Reese and possibly Christian Cantwell would have the best chances. Christian would benefit from more lift at the front of the circle – the reverse helix.

11. Is it true you have thrown in training 80ft the senior shot, and 100ft the high school shot?  
In what year were you able to do that?

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

I've thrown the 16 pound shot nearly 85 feet in practice. This was at altitude in El Paso. I'd been throwing a lot of footballs, baseballs and even snowballs. I was throwing 4 pound shots about 150'. I had loosened up my ability to use a full range of motion. I was using my lats and my hips and not just shoving with my arm and shoulder.

I had problems with the 7' ring. My longest competitive throw, albeit a foul, was 78' 11".

12. What shot weights did you use most in training? How far could you throw them?

I used a plethora of different weight shots ranging up to the 22 pound, which I threw for technique. It seemed the heavier the shot, the more I had to concentrate on my technique.

I used a 22, 20, 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 9 and 8. All were senior shot sized. I believe they gave me the confidence in my technique.

Further, for every 15 pounds of increased strength, I saw an increase of a foot in my distances. After keeping and reviewing my training diary, I learned that this was my formula.

George Woods believed it took 20 pounds of additional strength to add a foot in distance. George was stronger than I, but we had similar indoor throws, 72' 2" and 72' 6".

13. Did you use medicine balls also for shot put drills? What weights?

I used them during drills, specifically a linear rotational step similar to a pitcher in cricket, coming over the top. I got the ball speed going at release and stepped through the arc and then released. Just working the feet, and concentrating on the linear aspects of the throw going and coming over the top. This is similar to a Ferris wheel.

14. You have been a very fast sprinter also - did you train regular sprints?

I was a fast sprinter. I worked on sprints a great deal in my training. In fact, when I entered The Superstars, I wanted to beat some of the football players. One in particular ran through airports in ads for Hertz. I outran Bruce Jenner in the sprints and the hurdles. I could jump 2M and cleared it by 4". My 40 time of 4.3 was as fast as most running backs.

I had the sayings "quick feet are happy feet" or "quick versus quake (of the ponderous throwers)".

15. What have been your most important weight-training exercises and what were the best weights you could lift in this exercises?

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

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.

16. Is the story true you used only 5-6 trainings/week?

I had 5 or 6 training sessions a week, but they would last all day – 8 full hours. I was training for Superstars, including cycling, swimming, golf and basketball. I was constantly energized and constantly active. I lifted weights, threw the shot, discus and the hammer. I stayed very busy.

17. I would be interested in some additional data of your Biography:

- You placed 6th in 1972 Olympic Games - did you use the spin or glide technique there?
  - a. Glide
- You turned professional at ITA was this 1973 to 1975?
  - a. I turned pro in 1973 and competed through 1975. There were only 3 meets in 1976. I believe the USOC bought the head of the ITA.
- You competed in 1976 Olympic trials after a court decision, and placed 4th?
  - a. This was the 1980 trials, not 1976. I was a commentator in 1976. In 1976, I remember seeing Barishnikov. I jumped in the circle with regular clothes and street shoes and threw 22M+. I asked him to train with me and he walked away like he didn't see what had just happened. I upset him somewhat. I was also good at the discus. I placed 7<sup>th</sup> at the 1972 Olympic Trials in the discus at about 198'. During one stretch of meets in Europe, I had victories over Silvester, Vollmer and Powell at a 2 to 1 ratio. My discus was coming along very well, but when I went to the ITA and converted to the spin, I added 6 rotational throws to the end of my workout.
- When were you officially allowed again to start at US meets and when at international meets and championships?
  - a. I was granted the right to throw by John Holt. The IAAF Rules Committee gave me the freedom to compete in any and all competitions in 1980. That was the year we were going to Moscow. I decided not to take it to court even though the US Track Federation was still blocking me.
- What place and performance did you have at Olympic trials in 1984 and 1988?
  - a. I was still being blocked in 1984. I had several court appearances, including the Federal Appeals Court. I won court decisions in San Francisco, New York, and Syracuse. They tried to take the case back to Colorado Springs where they felt they had a friendlier court. I was finally given unrestricted eligibility in 1987, to which my mother said "It's about time". I had a bout with dysentery at the 1988 Trials and was barely able to compete. I narrowly missed the finals. Had I made the team, I would have been outmatched by the performance levels of Timmerman and Barnes in Seoul.

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

- Your last competition was 1988 TAC-Championships, where you placed 2nd - is this correct?
  - a. My second place had much to do with the absence of many Americans who were running from the drug testing. They handed me the competition.
- How many US-titles did you win (Indoor, Outdoor and NCAA)?
  - a. My throwing statistics are listed on my website at <http://www.brianoldfield.com/throwing%20chronology.htm>

18. What were the main reasons, the ITA had to be liquidated after a short time again?

I was not privy to any inside information, so these are just my opinions. I think there was a large slush fund. The ITA mentors/founders created the Virginia Slims tennis for women, they created NASCAR. They were creating industry for sports and trying to sell it, but they couldn't find anyone to buy it and they didn't want anyone to get stuck with it. It was too much work. It would spoil their creativity. Also, the NFL Players Association came in and was trying to get a union started.

There wasn't enough funding. It cost more to rent track facilities than it did to pay and transport the athletes.

Between the expenditures and the bailout for the president, leaving us high and dry, the Olympic slush fund, it didn't have a chance to grow from one Olympics to another.

If you look at today's' Grand Prix events, the ITA was the forerunner for modern day professionalism. It set the tone. We had pacer lights, rabbits and athletes that were very good. The ITA athletes would have made a good Olympic team by themselves.

19. How did the ITA make money?

Sponsors - Dairy Queen, Personna (razor blades) and Pillsbury.

As an aside, Pillsbury, Pillsbury and Pillsbury was the international law firm that wouldn't give me my competition status back for the Olympics in 1984 because they said they didn't have enough time to put their story together. They talked the judge into extending the court date to the day the Olympics closed in 1984. Therefore, I didn't get to compete at the trials.

20. Were there many throwers in the ITA?

Besides me, there was:

Randy Matson – world record holder and Olympic Gold medalist

Fred DiBernardi – one of the first to win the shot and discus at the NCAA with a 70' 5" personal best

Karl Salb – 69' 1" personal best; could also throw the discus over 180' from a stand

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

We had better competitions in the ITA than anywhere else in the world.

21. How many ITA Shot Put competitions did you have there per year?

They originally planned to do about 40 events per year, but they only held 12, 14, 8, 3 and 1 annually beginning in 1973.

22. How was it possible to train on a world class level as an amateur who was not allowed to earn any money from sports, after finishing college?

I had a job as a school teacher for a couple years when I was training for the Olympics. After that I turned pro. There were small payments under the table by equipment and shoe companies. There were also some appearance fees.

23. You have competed in many other sporting events, including Superstars / Strongman / Highland Games - What were the best results you could achieve there? Did you specially train for these events also?

In the Strongman, I could push press 450 but they wouldn't let me. They said I didn't finish the press at 350 (the third rep), so I was eliminated from that competition.

Highland Games I still have a world record of 63' 1" with the 18 pound stone. I liked the 56 pound weight thrown over the bar. I could throw over 17' right or left handed. Throwing rotationally on the grass helped my shot putting. Before my Highland Games experience, I threw 75' and warmed up at 80'. I would throw 67'+ from a stand. That meant I got 7.5' from my rotation (an improvement of about 12%). My HG training, something I call my internal exile, my distances improved from 12-14' over stands and step outs over 18'. My stands had gone from 67' to 61'.

I predict that if you took Udo Beyer and the top sprinter and weightlifter and combined them into the perfect shot put athlete, a throw of 91' is possible. If I had an 8' circle, I could have thrown 85'. I think that leaves me as the closest to ever achieving that perfect throw.

24. Is it true you planned a boxing fight against Ali? Did you train any boxing?

I sparred with Ali and boxed with a professional named John Caruso out of San Francisco. He taught me how to box. I got a one round exhibition with Ali in Atlanta.

25. Your roommate was John Powell - did you also train together?

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

Yes. We trained together. We were Olympic buddies. We first met in 1968 when I first saw McGrath throw the rotation. I think I defeated John in the discus at the Nationals 176' to 175'. We became friends and roommates after that.

26. Did you also train with Ricky Bruch, who was coached by John?

John went to Sweden for a couple months to work with Bruch. They both ended up throwing the same career best distance. I never trained with Bruch.

27. What were the most important trainings, partners, coaches you had in your long career?

I'm a pragmatist. I tried to take the best from every training partner and competitor I met. How low did they get? How high did they release? How much speed did they have? How much separation did they have? Where did they hold the ball on their neck? How did they use their left side as it regards locking and blocking? Where was the acceleration? I did my best to piece these things together myself. At that time, there were no coaches for the rotational shot.

However, the closest person to a coach or mentor was John Powell. He helped my discus immensely. I could regularly throw 230' in practice.

28. Did or do you coach athletes also?

I have continued coaching since the end of my competitive career. Shot putting was my career. I tried other jobs, but nothing really interested me. Working with throwers is what I want to do.

29. In 1985 you competed in Innsbruck/Austria - do you remember the competition and some of the Austrian Throwers?

In late 1984, I had surgery for diverticulitis. I was seriously weakened and it took a lot of training to get back to a decent throwing level. I threw 70' 4.25" which is still a Masters record for 40 year olds. I really consider that one of my most significant accomplishments.

30. After your career you got serious health problems with your back - do you think this was because you trained too long on a high level?

I was born with a bad back. I was lucky to have as many competitive years as I did. The pain was always there. It kept me out of the military. I still have back problems today. Doctors have worked on my legs to eliminate sciatica problems, but without much relief.

In closing, I want to thank you for remembering me. All the throwers I competed against are the closest to me now because they truly understand what it is like to throw with

Austrian Athletics Federation  
Robert Katzenbeisser Interview

everything that you've got and then settle for the results. Having been on that journey my entire life, I can totally relate to them.