

A bunch of big shots

George Woods, Randy Matson or Al Feuerbach should win the shot at the Olympics—unless one of three East Germans puts them to shame

Not bad, sports fans, you have just told us the name of the third-string catcher for the 1938 Chicago Cubs, the amount of tread remaining on the right rear tire of the car that won the 1946 Indianapolis 500 and the date of birth of the maiden aunt of the guy who carried the water bottle for Primo Carnera in his second fight. Now for the \$64 question—who won the silver medal in the shotput in the 1968 Olympics? Tell you what, you can have the fully equipped camper and the year's supply of bubble gum if you just tell us his nationality. His name was George Woods. Now, where did he come from? "Obscurity," answered George Woods last week in Los Angeles. "And after Mexico City that's where I went back to. My fame might not be much but there's nothing wrong with my timing."

Woods is not entirely unknown, of course, if only because people like Randy Matson and Al Feuerbach, who have pretty much dominated the event for the last two years, have kept an eye on the 6' 2" 300-pounder out of, in truth, Worden, Ill. (pop. 1,100). All year long, when people asked who would represent the U.S. in the shot at Munich, Matson and Feuerbach insisted it would be themselves and George Woods.

"And people kept asking them who Woods was," said Woods. "Finally, I figured it was time to show them."

Two weeks ago he did. In the Compton Invitational at the Los Angeles Coliseum Woods got off a put of 70' 1 1/4". Only Matson, who has the world record of 71' 5 1/2", and Feuerbach, who did 70' 3 1/2" earlier this year, have also surpassed the 70' barrier.

"And now it's me and Feuerbach," said Woods, dismissing Matson, the 6' 6 1/2" 265-pound giant who, until running into problems in 1971, had outclassed the competition for years.

"And now it looks like me and Woods," said the 6' 1", 255-pound Feu-

erbach, also ignoring the 1968 gold medal winner.

"Woods and Feuerbach," mused Matson. "How nice. It should be an exciting duel. For second place."

And that's how it stood last week going into Friday night's Vons Classic (named after the sponsoring supermarket chain) in Los Angeles, followed by Saturday's Kennedy Games in Berkeley: Woods looking at Feuerbach; Feuerbach looking at Woods; and Matson looking down at them both. Six thousand miles away, East Germany's Heinz-Joachim Rothenburg (personal best of 69' 11 1/2"), Hartmut Briesenick (69' 2") and Hans-Peter Gies (69' 1 1/2") were keeping a figurative eye on all three.

"I hear Woods said he's worried about Feuerbach and the East Germans," said Matson, who came to Los Angeles five days before the meet to work with UCLA Assistant Coach Tom Tellez. "That doesn't bother me. In fact, it kind of helps. They are concerned with each other and I'm only concerned with myself. If I can work out my problem, if I can throw as well as I am capable, I feel I can beat them. If I can't, well, there are a lot more people around than those two who can beat me. But it's the same for them. Anybody can run into problems and miss the plane to Munich."

By Thursday afternoon Matson was confident that he and Tellez had finally pinpointed what had been bothering him since 1970. As Paul Waner, the old National League batting champion, would have said, Matson was a victim of a slow belly button. "In any sport," preached Waner, who was also a superb golfer and bowler, "you gotta have a quick belly button. That snaps around first and the rest of the body follows." Or, as Matson more delicately put it, his hand was getting ahead of his hips and he might as well have been throwing the shot left-handed. "Now it's just a matter of time," Matson said.

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300-pound Woods has a career best of 70' 1 1/4".



265-pound Matson owns world mark of 71' 5 1/2".



255-pound Feuerbach has heaved shot 70' 3 1/2".

"Woods says I'm through. We'll see."

Yeah, sure, said Woods, a 29-year-old admissions counselor at Southern Illinois University, who is convinced that except for a wrist injury he would have beaten Matson in the '68 Olympics. In 1968 Woods had surged from 62 feet to 69 in practice and figured he had the gold medal wrapped up. Then he injured his wrist.

"Randy winning in Mexico City with a throw of only 67' 4 1/4" was a big disappointment to me," he said. "I had won the trials with a 68-footer, but I hurt my wrist weight lifting. During the trials I had a cortisone shot and the wrist was taped. At Mexico City the drug rule nixed the cortisone and everybody said I couldn't tape my wrist, so I didn't. Then in the Games some European comes in with tape and I asked an official what goes. He pulled out a doctor's certificate and said that's all the guy needed. It still galls me. Nobody, no doctors, no team manager told me that and they all knew how badly I needed my wrist taped. That sure put me in a good mood for the rest of the day. My first throw was 66' 1/4", I skipped the second, my third was terrible, and I passed two of my three throws in the finals. I'll have a doctor's certificate this time whether I want to use tape or not."

After the Olympics, Woods gave up the shot for a try at pro football. He trimmed down to 275 and he could run 40 yards in five seconds flat, but when the St. Louis Cardinals said they wanted him at offensive guard he declined. He wanted to be a defensive tackle. They said he was too short. He said forget it.

"Alex Karras was a pretty good defensive tackle and he was only 6' 2"," Woods said. "But even after football fell through I didn't want any part of the shotput. I was too mentally exhausted. I just wanted to quit. Then last year the old hunger came back. That was before Feuerbach was known and I didn't want Randy to have it too easy."

In his first 1971 meet, Woods injured a finger and was out for the year. But this year he has been nothing short of sensational. "Now it's just a race with the clock," he said. "The injuries are stacking up and I'm trying to hold myself together until after the Games. I don't want another silver medal. I intend to win the gold and then I'm going to

hang it up and when my kids are big enough I'm going to point to it and show them the old man went out on top."

At the moment, though, besides Matson and the East Germans, there is Feuerbach, the 24-year-old world indoor record holder who, in addition to his 70' 3 1/2" outdoors, has hit 69 feet so consistently he feels disgusted with anything below it. In less than two years he has gone from 65 feet to No. 1 in the world.

"Which doesn't mean a thing at this point," he said. "It's nice, but so what? But if I'm still No. 1 after Munich, then it will be groovy. Last year I drove myself to show all the guys who said I was too short to be a great shotputter. Now that's done and I laugh about it. But there's a new motivation: the gold medal. You have to prove yourself in the Games and if you don't you don't win the gold. I need that. No way I want to lose. I still have a lot to prove."

If his countrymen finally have accepted him, Feuerbach feels that Europeans still look upon him as a long-haired freak who will drop out of sight at any moment.

"I hear them trying to explain why I am doing so well for my size," he said, "and in a way it's a compliment. They say it's drugs. God! First, every guy in Europe is on drugs and nobody over there has hit 70 feet. And, hell, drugs can only take you so far. They can't improve your technique. Matson says he doesn't take steroids. O.K. But nobody is giving out medals to guys who don't take them. I sure don't want anybody to think I'm pro drugs or pro steroids because I definitely am not. But all I know is that two years ago I was way down on the list and everybody ahead of me was taking drugs and I decided I had either better join the club or quit." Feuerbach thought about that a moment and then smiled. "I'm still making up my mind," he said.

Drugs may help a lot of athletes get to the Olympics but they won't help them once they are there. Scientists have come up with a test that will detect any steroids taken within the previous seven days.

"And then what is going to happen to the athlete who has been taking drugs but has to quit?" asked Matson, who used steroids for three weeks in 1964 before they were outlawed. "I'm afraid of

them. I'd hate to get to be 35 and suddenly find out I had fouled up myself physically—liver problems and all that. There's more to life than shotputting. But if it wasn't for the medical risk, if it was like taking vitamins, I admit I'd be tempted to take them. I wonder about some of the guys when I see such gigantic improvements. It can bother you if you aren't taking them yourself. I hear the Russians have an electrical machine that hooks right into the muscles. The shock is supposed to give you bulk and strength. Sometimes you wonder what you are competing against."

Like Matson, Woods sometimes wonders, too. "Not about steroids," he said. "If they are controlled and you use good sense I don't think they can hurt you. They are like anything else. If you take too much it'll hurt. It's the other stuff they are taking that bothers me, the hard stuff. The uppers and the downers. I know one guy who takes LSD just to train. He's not a shotputter. He's a weight lifter. It's fantastic. Like I said, after this year I'm getting out."

But before Woods goes, there is still the matter of a gold medal and last weekend he more than proved his worth. At the Vons Classic he won over Matson (69' 6 1/4") and Feuerbach (69' 3 1/4") with a put of 70' 1/4", the only time in the history of the event that three men have exceeded 69 feet. "And it was a rotten throw," he said. "I was open and it was all arm speed." At the Kennedy Games, Woods won again, this time with a 69' 1/2" to Feuerbach's 68' 9 1/4" and Matson's 68' 8 1/4".

"I guess you can say that Randy is back," said Feuerbach in Los Angeles after watching Matson get three throws over 69 feet. "He's going to be one tough hombre from now on." Feuerbach shook his head over his own performance. He had opened with a 67 plus, and except for his 69 and change, he hadn't done much better.

"Hey, Al," said Woods, "what's with the 67? Were you trying to psych me?"

"Well," said Feuerbach, "I had a plan. The first throw was supposed to be 67. Then I was going to add a foot onto each of the next five. Sixty-eight, 69, 70, 71 and then, boom, a big 72."

"What happened?"

Feuerbach laughed. "I forgot the plan."

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