

RECORD-SLINGING IN THE RAIN

Even in foul weather and on his off days Texas A&M's huge Randy Matson heaves the shot and discus so far that he has track coaches talking in superlatives and fellow athletes scrambling madly for cover by EDWIN SHRAKE

Down at the far end of the field the broad jumpers were jogging beside the runway to the broad-jump pit. They were bending and stretching, shaking out their muscles in the Texas sun, paying no attention to what was happening nearly 200 feet away, where a very large young man had picked up a discus. Suddenly somebody yelled. Something whizzed through the air above the broad jumpers, sailed over the runway and knocked a hunk out of the second lane of the track. Astonished, the broad jumpers looked at the discus lying on the track and then down toward where Randy Matson was standing. And that was all the broad-jumping anybody did for a while.

The throw—201 feet 5½ inches—was made in Waco a couple of weeks ago and was the longest in the history of college track, but it will not be allowed as a record because, of all things, Matson threw uphill. Had the field been level, the discus would have gone seven to ten feet farther.

Such performances, official or unofficial, are becoming commonplace for the 20-year-old Matson. Just five days earlier he had set the world record of 67 feet 11¼ inches in the shotput. What else he may accomplish if he does not lose interest is a matter of joyous speculation around Texas A&M, where Matson, now a sophomore, finally decided to enroll after picking through 100 scholarships.

"I know what's going to happen one of these days," said Baylor Track Coach Clyde Hart. "We'll see Matson standing on the middle platform at the Olympics, getting his gold medal. He'll peel off his A&M warmup suit, and underneath he'll have on a cape and a big S on his chest. Then he'll fly away, and we'll all wonder whether we really saw him."

Already Matson has become the most sought-after celebrity in track and field. Triangular meets with Matson in them draw about 4,000 people and can pay

Putting shot to the usual clatter of cameras, sweat-suited Matson sets Drake Relays mark.



for most schools' track budgets in a single day. Last week, with three major meets—the Penn, Mount San Antonio and Drake relays—crowding the schedule, Matson chose the trip to Des Moines and the Drake campus. There, despite an increasingly harried life that has made him begin to wonder about the pleasures of fame, Matson set meet records in the shotput and the discus and was voted the meet's outstanding athlete. On Saturday, when he set the shotput record with a—for him—piddling 63 feet 11 1/4 inches, he did not even bother to remove his Aggie warmup clothes. The temperature was in the low 40s and it was raining, but 11,000 people were in the old brick stadium, mostly in tribute to Matson.

Getting to Drake had not been easy. Matson had risen early on Thursday at College Station, the small central Texas town where A&M is located, and had driven through a countryside bright with bluebonnets to the Dallas airport 175 miles away. The charter plane that was to take him to Des Moines was two and a half hours late. Once it did take off, the air conditioning failed. Matson flew the entire way sweating, with his head bent over a history book. He lost eight pounds during the journey. That could have contributed to his comparatively poor showing. But he was not disturbed. Like other prodigies, he takes his achievements as a matter of course.

Back on campus at A&M, Matson lives in a dormitory room that is hardly larger than a ping-pong table, but in it are two beds, two desks, three chairs, Matson's roommate and Matson who, at 6 feet 6 1/2 and 255 pounds, is a crowd by himself. He eats A&M cafeteria food, and he drinks a diet supplement to keep his weight up.

On the walls are Olympic pennants—souvenirs of Tokyo, where Matson finished second in the shot to Dallas Long—and a tiger painted on black velvet. He has a stereo and a pan of fudge on his desk, and a telephone. That telephone he regards as his cross. He is a serious student in business administration with a better than B average, but since he has been breaking records week after week the telephone has rung constantly.

"I've thought about having the phone taken out," Matson said one afternoon last week. "But if I did that I'd just have to walk down all those stairs [four flights and no elevators] every time I got a call, and that wouldn't be any good."

This spring, after a run-in with the new A&M football coach, young Gene Stallings, Matson considered walking down those concrete stairs for the last time. Matson played football in high school and was perhaps the finest basketball player in the state. "He was the best defensive player I've seen," said West Texas State Basketball Coach Jimmy Viramontes. "He reminded me of Bill Russell." But Matson came to A&M to concentrate on the shot and the discus, not on basketball or football. During the recent workout one of his discus throws went off line and almost skulled some of Stallings' football players. When Matson walked over to retrieve the discus Stallings, a product of the Bear Bryant school of harder knocks, told him in so many words to take that funny-looking plate and go so far away they would have to communicate by mail. Matson went up to his room and started packing. Luckily for the Aggies, friends talked Matson out of leaving.

"I'm still not sure whether I would really have left," Matson said. "but I was thinking about it. I doubt if very many people here really like this place. But it's a great place to train. And I'm here strictly to train and to study. The main reason I came here in the first place was because of the weight coach, Emil Mamaliga. I need a lot of work with the weights, and Mamaliga is the best."

Matson is a young man of fairly simple tastes. During his senior year at Pampa High School in West Texas he was courted by Southern Cal. The coaches took Matson out to the USC campus, had him squired around by Parry O'Brien and showed him the movie stars. Instead of being impressed, Matson returned home determined to go to either A&M or the University of Texas. "One place they took me in California, coffee cost 50¢ a cup," he said. "I couldn't go to school out there."

Weight and eating are vital matters to Matson. "I just don't have much of an appetite," he said. "But I have to stay up to at least 255 because I'm not as strong as guys like Parry O'Brien or Dallas Long. My best bench press is 350 pounds. Long's is 510. My advantage is in height and reach. I use my wrists and fingers a lot more than Long or O'Brien in putting the shot. I like a lot of wrist action."

If there is a mystique to shotputting, it escapes Matson. He has tremendous

speed and technique inside the shot ring, but he gets no inner feeling of magic power, no visionary flash of being Superman. "As a matter of fact, I try not to think about a meet," he said. "I try to get my mind off it completely. When I'm in the ring I can't tell whether I'm going to be good or bad. Sometimes after I've let the shot go I think it might be pretty good. But during the throw I never think about that part of it. When I set that world record, I was thinking it wouldn't be a good throw at all, because I was kind of tired."

Matson does not particularly care for throwing the discus. His specialty is the shot. He uses 70% of his workout time on the shot and flings the discus as a sort of afterthought.

"There are too many variables in the discus," he says. "The wind has a big effect, and people are inconsistent. You get better as you get older. Right now, though, I prefer the shot. I hope I can throw it for 10 more years."

Al Oerter, who has won three straight Olympic championships in the discus, has spoken of retiring. Dallas Long, after getting his gold medal, announced he was retiring and said, in effect, he might as well, because Matson was going to wipe out everybody's records anyway. Matson is on the way to doing that.

But the public life has not appealed to him. He polished his speechmaking while working as a public relations man for a utility company in Abilene last summer, but he clearly would rather wrestle a gorilla than make a speech. He gets hundreds of fan letters from kids asking for advice in the shot and discus, and he tries to answer each of them individually. The result is that Matson has to stay up very late to write letters, talk on the phone and study, and that makes it harder for him to maintain his weight. But at least Aggie Basketball Coach Shelby Metcalf has stopped asking Matson to play basketball—although that was so painful Metcalf can barely force himself to look at Matson on campus.

"I'm sure it will all turn out to be worth it," Matson said. "In 10 years I can quit, and I ought to have some kind of good job or business going for me by then somewhere here in Texas." By then Matson may have to quit purely because of lack of competition. Already his appearances, like the one at Drake last week, are more exhibitions than competitive field events. **END**