TRACK & FIELD

Cobb opens some eyes in triple jump

Triple jumper Vincent Cobb has a habit of making people sit up and take notice. At the '88 Indoor TAC Track and Field Championships, he raised some eyebrows, finishing fourth with a personal best of 54 feet 5 inches. At press time, he was ranked sixth in the U.S.

Cobb is an '87 Morehouse graduate and is gradually putting it all together in his quest to make the American team for the '88 Summer Olympics in Korea.

"I had no idea how well I would do going into the TAC nationals," Cobb said. "I injured my knee at the Eastman Kodak Invitational in January and I was only 85 percent recovered. So I felt that whatever happened, I'd take it. The TAC performance was the best I've ever had in a major championship."

At the start of the TAC competition, it didn't appear that Cobb would wind up making an unforgettable impression. His initial efforts were average -- 52 feet, nothing special. "But on my last attempt, everything fell in place and I got off for a good one," Cobb recalls. "That jump got everybody's attention."

The TAC indoor championship meet wasn't the first time that Cobb had called attention to himself. He showed flashes of world-class form in 1982 as a freshman long jumper at an indoor meet at the University of Tennessee. Ralph Boston, 1960 Olympic long jump champion, watched. Boston was present as one of the meet's officials. One look at Cobb told him that the youngster had something extra.

Napoleon Cobb, Morehouse track coach (no relation) was also surprised. He knew very little about Vince, didn't even know that he and the freshman walk-on from Los Angeles had the same last name. Coach Cobb recalls that moment in Knoxville:

"After Vince took his first jump, Ralph yelled to me in the stands. He kept shouting, 'This is the one, Nap. This is the one you've been looking for.' (Coach Cobb and Boston were track teammates at Tennessee State in the early '60s).

Even though Vince had good long jumping skills, Coach Cobb has always felt that his best event was the triple jump. Vince had tried the triple only once in high school (47 feet). He didn't take up the event seriously until midway through his first collegiate track season. His best that year was 52 feet 10 inches, which earned him a second-place finish at the Division II championships. From that point, the triple jump became Vince's primary event.

Formerly known as the hop, step and jump, the triple jump is arguably track and field's most demanding when it comes to technique. At the world-class level, it's very difficult to excel without technique, regardless of how much pure athleticism one has. The triple jump combines coordination, timing and technique like no other event.

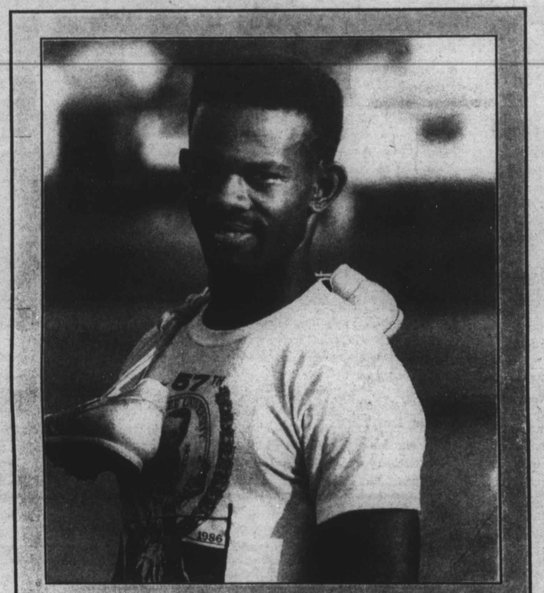

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Cobb raised a few eyebrows with his fourth-place finish in the '88 TAC indoor nationals.

Not having a national reputation as a triple jumper has never fazed Cobb, a high school physical education instructor who also coaches the jumpers at Morehouse.

He feels he has a solid shot at making the Olympic team.

"The triple jump," Cobb points out, "is such a technical event that you can never accurately predict who will place where (like in the sprints). The odds are very high that anyone ranked in the top 10 can make the Olympic team. One mistake made during any part of the jump can make a big difference in how well you do. If you can jump 55 feet or 56 feet at that level, you have a genuine chance (to make the team)."

He has jumped 56 feet in practice and is aware that achieving in practice as opposed to achieving in competition is very different.

Cobb picked up on a lot of technical expertise in his event when he jumped against the best in the '86 TAC outdoor nationals. He discovered that his distance was hindered because he ran too fast on his approach. That caused him to be out of control and off balance on his initial take-off. "I was leaning too much when I'd take off. By watching the others, I learned to be more under control on the runway. I started keeping my body square, which gave me more balance. That one technical thing has enabled me to improve a great deal."

In college, Cobb was a three-time All-America and four-time SIAC triple jump champ. His best collegiate effort was 53 feet at the '86 King Games. In his post-graduate days, he's more polished and more mature mentally and physically. He continues to improve and has ample time to grow by the time the U.S. Olympic Trials are held this summer.

Cobb adds that completing his college studies has helped him reach a higher level of performance. As a biology major at the academically tough school, he found himself mixing the rigors of training with an average class load of 17 hours every semester. "It was tough for me to devote as much time to my event as I would have liked to because of my studies," Cobb says. "Combining the training with all of the studying and exams was very tedious.

"Now, I'm able to place all of my concentration on the triple jump, and it's made a world of difference." Cobb gets in his usual three hours of training and that has helped him find a groove.

In addition, the 24-year-old has discovered that intense video sessions and being an assistant track coach further aid him in reaching higher levels. In both cases, he's able to critique what he's doing and make adjustments. This is even more so in his role as coach.

In coaching jumpers, Cobb goes over the fundamentals often. This is especially important for him (the athlete as coach) because the people he tutors are either beginners in the event, or haven't reached his level yet.

"Coaching gives me the opportunity to carefully look at other jumpers for form and body movement," he says. "In my event, it's always good to go over the basic things."

Napoleon Cobb has witnessed Vincent's growth. He agrees that maturity and technique have combined to make the triple jumper the athlete he is today. However, there's more to Vincent Cobb's progression than the items previously mentioned.

Says Coach Cobb: "What has always impressed me about Vince is his mental outlook. When he was a freshman, we had athletes who were more talented, but they could never beat him. His will to win has always been the thing that distinguished him from the others."

As for his sentiments on how his pupil will fare in the Olympic Trials, the coach says that Vincent is in good shape. "If he can go into the trials ranked in the top five, he has an excellent chance. He has the ability to produce on the right day at the right time. Hard work has made him a top-flight jumper."

The fact that Vincent Cobb has made it this far can be considered a miracle. Early in his junior year (1984) he suffered a serious knee injury while long jumping at the Florida A&M Relays. Cobb tore the ligaments in his left knee so badly that doctors felt he'd always walk with a limp. Competing again, they thought, was out of the question.

During that competition, Cobb landed awkwardly in the pit. He sustained the kind of injury normally associated with football. To make matters worse, he had already qualified for the '84 Olympic Trials in the triple jump.

Coach Cobb naturally assumed that Vince would never jump again. He offered Vince a position as assistant track coach so he would have the funds to continue school and graduate. Vince would have none of that, however, vowing to return. He was redshirted, and in '85, came back to win another conference title and finish fifth in the Division II nationals.

"To me, that was the turning point in him getting where he is now," Coach Cobb says. "I believe he made some hard decisions on being determined to come back because he missed out on making the '84 Games, which were held in his home town. It was an uphill struggle, but he's overcome that."

Vince Cobb is methodical in his efforts to become the best he can be. He understands that a high level of performance isn't always attained instantly.

He's willing to break down his event and analyze it, scrutinizing every phase. His plan is one that he's very comfortable with. It works and he continues to grow as an athlete.

— CRAIG T. GREENLEE

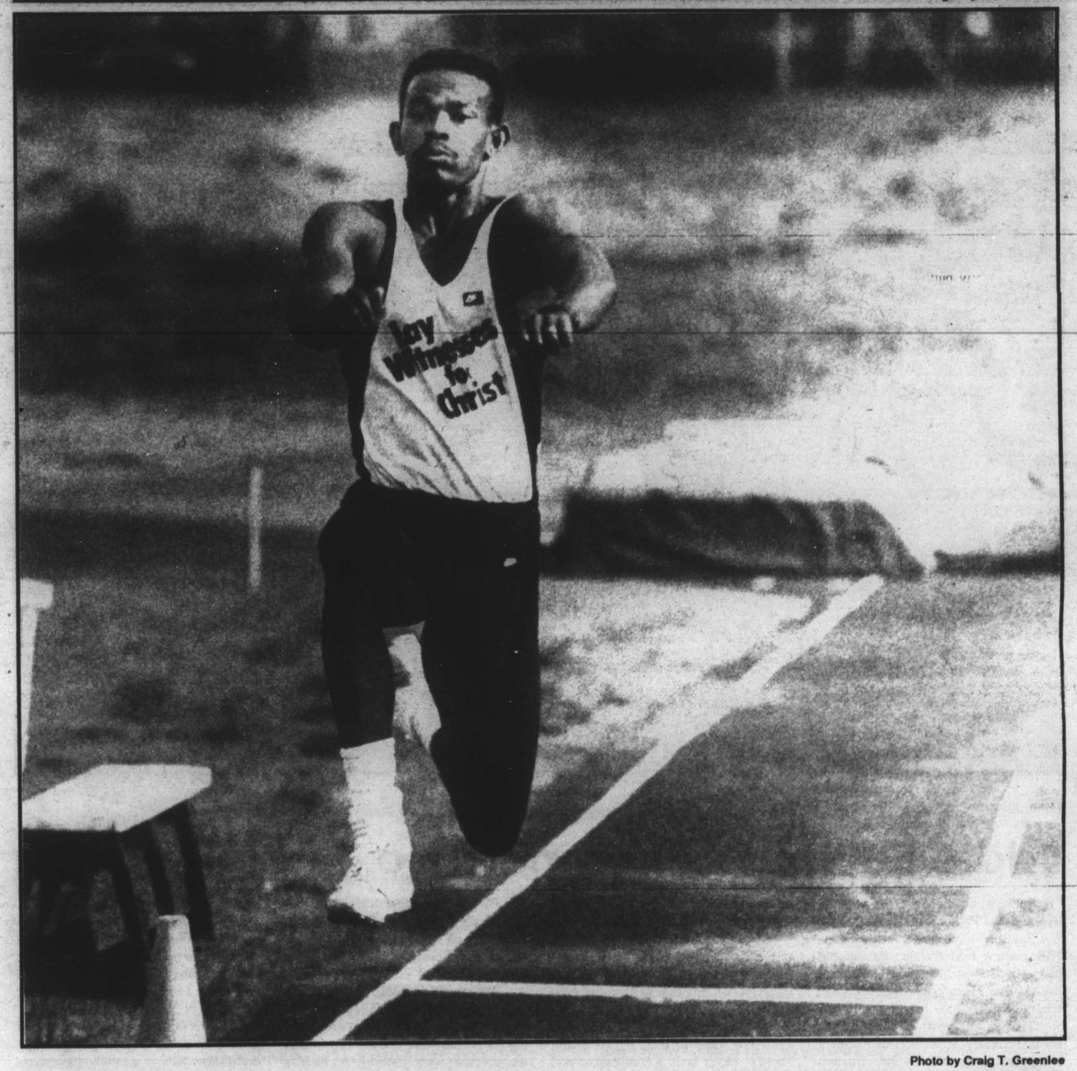

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

A lack of patience is the reason why there aren't many quality American triple jumpers, says Vince Cobb. "That's why I've stayed with Coach Napoleon Cobb. It's been a gradual process. But it's working and I'm getting there."