

Journey To A Dark Past

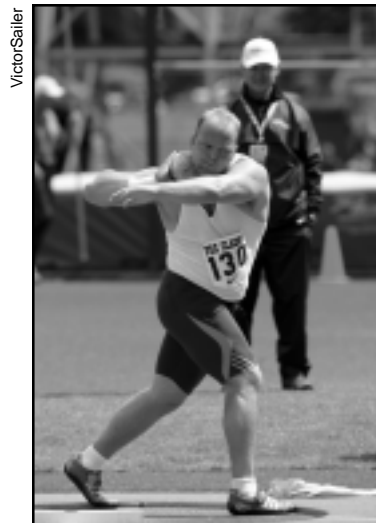
By Adam Nelson

My experience in Dakar was amazing. My first trip to Africa began with a three hour delay in the Atlanta airport. My flight, originally scheduled for departure at 9:30pm on Wednesday night, did not leave until almost 1am Thursday morning. Thankfully—or not, I had a 4.5 hour layover in Paris’s CDG before my flight from Paris to Dakar. As it turned out, I would need every minute.

Flying coach across the Atlantic until recently was never that bad. Unfortunately, the rising costs of gas coupled with the instability of the financial security of the airlines resulted in streamlining of air travel. The decreased number of flights means flights are fuller. In my case, every leg of my trip was sold out, leaving me with no opportunity to change my reduced leg room, middle-seat to an aisle (I was in the last row of the plane). Lucky me!

When I finally landed in Dakar 20 hours after I arrived at the Atlanta airport, I was greeted by the mob of local Senegalese taxi drivers aggressively pursuing any tourist for a fare. After a lot of confusion, I made it to the Hotel Meridien President around 10pm. The hotel was gorgeous. It’s a 5 star hotel that sits on the Atlantic Ocean. With all the conveniences and accoutrements of a great hotel, I enjoyed an unexpected and uncharacteristic great night of sleep. I awoke refreshed and ready for another unpredictable day. In case you were wondering, I set low expectations for the meet. There were just too many unknowns and firsts involved for the meeting directors. Flexibility and patience were necessary.

We were scheduled to compete at 4:30 pm on the Island of Goree, but this got delayed to 5:45pm so the Italians could join the competition. The trip to Goree required a bus ride through a large cross section of Dakar. The route took us south along the coast line and by many large homes of the wealthy, then continued through some of the poorer areas leading into town. Though Senegal is probably the most stable country in the region with a well-established democratic political system, the gap between the upper class and the working class is huge. As Americans we have no idea what poverty really is when com-



Nelson at the 2006 Prefontaine.

pared to the poor in other regions of the world.

The bus trip concluded at a small port where the ferry would shuttle us over to the Island of Goree. For those who don’t know, Goree served for 300 years as the last stop for slaves

before leaving for the Americas or wherever else. The island doesn’t appear to have changed too much. Many of the original buildings and forts appear to still be standing and occupied. I can’t verify this, but there appeared to be no motorized vehicles and, otherwise, few of the conveniences of the modern world. Nonetheless it represented a significant—albeit dark—part of African and American history. You can’t help but be deeply moved by the history and the story of this island. Though I wouldn’t recommend this tour as a way to get fired up for a competition, it will make you think.

After the tour of the island led by the curator of the museum on Goree and attended by the Lamine Diack, President of the IAAF, we returned to the competition site. At this point we were told the competition would start in about 10 to 15 minutes. Reese and I began to warm-up as the ferry carrying the Italian shot putters pulled into the docks. At the completion of an abbreviated warm-up, the officials showed us a version of the throwing order, and I stress a version. It changed three or four times during the competition.

The circle was freshly poured with parts that still hadn’t cured properly. It was slightly imbalanced and the surface was rough and not flat. There were highs and lows, fast spots and slow spots. Incidentally, I’ve never competed in an event outside the stadium that didn’t have issues with the circle. Reese and I both wondered how the competition would fare on such a circle. As it turned out, the circle didn’t make that big of a difference. It was a great place to compete.

The Senegalese people surrounded the landing area. I estimate 400 people standing around the sector cheering each competitor on. In many ways it reminded me of the world’s strongest man competitions. They are contested in similar locations in intimate venues. As we began to throw,



the crowd would break out in a clapping and screaming. It was crazy. Does anyone still remember the Portland shot



This castle, unlike some others that started as trading outposts, was built by the British to trade slaves and bully their colonial neighbors. The tower behind the canon was the British governor's residence.

put competitions? This was every bit as loud and exciting as that competition except set on an island with a temperature of 80 degrees, no clouds in the sky, a good bit of dust, and the ocean less than 30 feet away. It was great.

These intimate venues allow spectators to gain a full appreciation of what we do on the infield. There are few instances during which a normal track fan can view a field

event competition from inside the track, and fewer circumstances when the fans are actually close enough to touch the athletes. As field eventers, we should embrace and encourage these "street competitions." They serve as great promotions for the main events, and they provide for more opportunities for us to compete.



Some 200 slaves were kept in a holding cell.

My experience in Senegal was truly remarkable. With the head of the IAAF attending the event and the success of the accompanying track meet the next day (I believe 60,000 people showed up for the meet), I look forward to making this trip next year. I also look forward to other meet directors using the field events as a promotional event for the larger competition. *LSTJ*

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