

# TALKING HEADS

By Glenn Thompson

All throwers size up the competition at a meet. If there's a strange face warming up with a physique that looks dangerous, you can rest assured that everyone's checking them out. But even then, you can only see who they are as a thrower. You don't know a thing about who they are and what they are about.

This is even more true at the Masters' level. The athletes come from all walks of life, and often are very successful in their chosen field and personal lives.

Two shining examples are Paul Ossman and Joe Johns. Aside from turning age 50 next season, they are very high profile television personalities in their own realms.

Paul Ossmann joined Atlanta's 11Alive News in August of 1998 and serves as the station's Chief Meteorologist for the weekday broadcasts at the Atlanta NBC affiliate. Ossman has worked in the Atlanta market for 18 years with great success, having the charisma to serve as the original host of Good Morning Atlanta.

Joe Johns became a fixture on network television news in the 1990s as Capitol Hill correspondent for NBC. His reports were seen on the "Today Show," "Week-end Nightly News" and other NBC news programs, as well as cable television on MSNBC and the internet on MSNBC.com. He currently works as CNN's Capitol Hill correspondent and can be seen frequently on Anderson Cooper 360 and other CNN broadcasts.

Despite their great personal success, neither is overly impressed with himself and both own self-deprecating senses of humor. And they both love throwing.

## Back In The Day

Ossman started throwing in his junior year of high school. He learned as he went. "I came from a weight lifting/baseball mentality, so I had to learn to put, and not throw, the shot," he recalls. "My first meet I threw 42 feet. By the end of the year, 49'. At the end of the following year I threw 54' 11", breaking our school record. Interestingly, I broke the school record the same day Brian Oldfield tossed the 16 pounder 75 feet [May 10, 1975]. Because the spin was new, it was banned in New Jersey in 1975."

Ossman enjoyed the sport so much he joined the

Willingboro Track Club, run by Bill and Evelyn Lewis, the parents of Carl and Carol Lewis. Bill was Ossman's assistant track coach at John F. Kennedy High. The schools split his senior year, with a younger Carl going to Willingboro High School.

Ossman's collegiate career was short and a mixed bag of frustration and joy. "I got disillusioned by college track and field," he recalls. "The time was spent mostly on those quality athletes that could score points in bigger meets, and not so much for those who still wanted to learn. I lost 45 pounds my freshman year, but accumulated enough points in the hammer throw to letter at Ohio University. After my last meet that year, I wouldn't look at or pick up a shot put for the next 28 years."

So Ossman got on with his professional life.



Don't let the Mike Wallace pose fool you...Johns is a great guy and very personable.

Johns started throwing in junior high school in Columbus, Ohio. He was hooked after winning the junior high school city championship. He attended West High School in Columbus and continued his winning ways taking the State discus AAA championship in 1975. His prep best was 180-1.

"My best measured foul was 187-8, a sector foul in the first competitive throw of my senior year. I still remember seeing it drifting out of the sector and my begging it to, 'Come back, come back,'" Johns recalls as if it was yesterday.

Johns accepted a scholarship to Marshall University in West Virginia.

"To be completely honest with you, back in the day, I was something of an athletic rabble rouser in college, if you can imagine that," recalls Johns. "Coming to

the university as a thrower, I felt there were some sports one has to stand up and fight for, or they may lose out. Back then, track and field was one such sport. I challenged the university in those days to standup for so-called 'non-revenue producing sports' and nearly transferred to another school over it, in part because my Marshall track coach at the time, Rod Odonnell, was himself such an advocate for the sport. But that is another story. I only mention all of this to say there's a place in amateur athletics for people who speak out for their sports."

Marshall was then a member of the Southern Athletic Conference, including schools such as South Carolina,

VMI, William & Mary, the Citadel, Furman, Davidson, East Carolina. Johns won Southern Conference gold four times – twice indoors in the shot, once outdoors in the shot, and once in the discus. His best in the shot was 55-8 and 167-9 in the discus.

Johns double majored in government (political science) and communications in college, but ended up graduating with a degree in government only (political science) because, “Communications got busted down to a last minute minor because I wanted to get out of school!”

### **Hittin’ The Road**

John’s original plan had been to go to law school straight out of college, but after his four years of eligibility for track were finished at Marshall, he still needed a few hours to graduate.

“I got a job doing the news on the night shift for NBC’ affiliate WSAZ-TV in Charleston, WV. And when I did finally graduate, I did my own little cost-benefit analysis and figured, “Hey I’ve already launched on a career path, why not stick it out for a while?”

From Charleston, Johns went to WSOC-TV in Charlotte, NC, and in 1983 he moved to WRC-TV, the NBC-owned station in Washington. In 1993 he made the move from affiliate to the networks, signing on with NBC News as a Capitol Hill correspondent.

Johns moved to CNN in 2003. “I was originally assigned as a Congressional Correspondent for the full CNN Network, but now, I’m essentially a Congressional Correspondent assigned to ‘AC 360,’ the Anderson Cooper show,” he says. “I’m mainly doing government accountability reporting now, which follows paper trails, government spending, corruption, waste, fraud and abuse.”

“I had a very round about way to get into the news biz” recalls Ossman. “My degree is in Clinical Psychology. But I knew shortly after graduating that I would not be making a career in the field. I instead kept believing that maybe I could find a career as rewarding as my high school shot putting days.”

Ossman started Graduate School at Rider College in New Jersey and found out there that he was in the wrong field. One of the professors suggested a career in sales/marketing or radio/TV. That was the spark that turned on the light. Shortly after this, Ossman left grad school behind to explore the world of radio and television.

His next step was the American Academy of Broadcasting in Philadelphia. He was 24 years old in a class where the average age was 18. The school had a job placement service, but students had to be willing to move and work in small market radio stations. Ossman was focused and ready.

His first job was in the small West Texas burg of Lamesa at a 250-watt daytime radio station. “The broadcast signal was weaker than my Mr. Microphone I got in 1972,” laughs Ossman. “I gave up Springsteen and the Sound of Philadelphia for the country twangs of Bill Wills and Ferlin Huskey. But I was a paid professional and on my way. Lamesa gave way to my first television job in Abilene, Texas. A year and half later I was the main weather anchor in Montgomery, Alabama. Nine months later I was in Birmingham. Then 18 months later I was hired at the CBS station in Atlanta. I have worked in Atlanta since 1988.”

After getting to Atlanta, Ossman went back to school to study Meteorology at Mississippi State in their correspondence program designed for distance learning. He took enough classes to supplement his work experience and earn a seal of approval from the National Weather Association.



Ossman bears a strong resemblance to NFL Films’ Steve Sabol and Atlanta Falcons head coach Jim Mora, Jr.

“Being our main weathercaster at the NBC affiliate in Atlanta, I take my job seriously. There are times when people’s lives are at stake during severe weather. And there are times when I get to showcase my personality. In other words, be myself.”

“When people meet me, it is great when they say that I am approachable and am the same in person as I am on the tube. That is the biggest compliment I think a television personality can receive. I always keep that in mind: be yourself. Not everyone is going to like you, that’s just life. But you can’t have a ‘put on’ personality on the air. People can usually sniff those types out very quickly.”

Ossman gets to work around 3pm and leaves close to midnight. In between there are meetings, forecasting, making graphics for weather reports for the 6pm, 7pm and 11pm shows. And yes, he gets his makeup done by a makeup artist around 4pm each day. Then he gets changed for the show and/or any promotional commercials prior to 6pm.

When there is severe weather like storms and tornadoes, it boosts his workload. “Reporting on breaking weather news is a rush, like the fireman fighting the fire, like having

that big throw at the right time (haven't had that yet, but hoping)," he says. "It really tests your skills of communication and coolness when you have to relay that information to thousands that count on your expertise."

"I love my job," he gushes. "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't enjoy going to work. Like any job some days are more enjoyable than most. And it isn't all mirrors and makeup, although mirrors and makeup are a part of my daily routine."

"It's a career many dream about, but few get to do on a daily basis. I am one of the lucky ones. Hopefully I will be in the biz for many years to come."

Ossman laughs when talking about visits to the makeup counter in stores, and his wife needs to inform the sales associate, "It's for my husband."

Another great thing about Ossman's job is access to celebrities he's enjoyed or admired. "The older I get, the more I realize that they are just people, and in some cases just kids with money."

For six years at the Fox station across town in Atlanta, Ossman co-hosted a morning talk show and got to meet some very interesting people, including Mickey Mantle, Jennifer Holliday, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Spike Lee. And the list goes on.

In fact, Ossman has interviewed more than a thousand celebrities. "My favorites are the ones that seem real, and don't need a slew of bodyguards to prove that they are special," he says. "They are cordial and know that we (the media) are just trying to do our jobs. With that said, some of my favorites include Alan Sheppard (first American in space), Tom Hanks (great sense of humor, met him on a press junket for *Saving Private Ryan*), Jennifer Holliday (she sang "I am Changing", I cried), Geraldo Rivera (he was invited to my wedding), Brooke Shields (she remembers names), Muhammad Ali (I was so nervous meeting him; he was a boyhood idol), Paul McCartney (met him in the press room in 1994 before a concert at the Georgia Dome), and eight-time Mr. Olympia Lee Haney. Lee is a good friend, and truly epitomizes what a celebrity should

be. He is direct, personal, smiles, has a great laugh and a great family man."

"One of my more disappointing experiences occurred on the set of the sitcom "Friends." I guess I expected them to be more interested, and on the whole they weren't. Athletes can be tricky. Most are kids with money. Some of these athletes love entourages, even before they score their first touchdown in the NFL. Never could understand that."

Ultimately Ossman's vocation resurrected his avocation.

### Back In The Game

"Being in television gives one access sometimes to people and places that others can only dream about," says Ossman. "That brings me to my return to shot putting. I was doing a live shot at Centennial Olympic park on my 47<sup>th</sup> birthday: June 18, 2004. I was asked do my weathercast at the Titan Games, so naturally I picked out a place close to the shot put event. It had been awhile since

I followed the sport. I had heard of Adam Nelson, but didn't know what he looked like. I watched intently as John Godina, Reese Hoffa, Brad Snyder, Christian

Cantwell and Nelson put on a show in front of screaming fans."

"Godina and Reese tossed close to 70 feet. Then Cantwell hit one that measured 73 feet. Are you kidding me? I remember Al Feuerbach reaching 71-7 and thinking that was incredible. Then Adam tosses one that later measured more than 74 feet, but was a foot foul. The sport had left me behind. I didn't know

these people and these distances in one meet were something I had never seen before. The one thing I did know is that I missed the sport and the training."

Taking matters into his own hands, Ossman talked with University of Georgia throws coach Don Babbitt to inquire about watching Adam and Reese train one day. Ossman lives an hour-and-a-half away from Athens, but it was well worth the drive.

"Arriving at the track, I noticed that Reese and Adam were alone throwing in the shot put area," recalls Ossman.



Ossman from upper left, on the couch with Matt Lauer and Katie Couric on the Today Show, with Tom Hanks and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“Here are two of the best putters in the world, and they train and throw in relative anonymity. I remember as a boy the stir Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier used to create when they were seen in Philadelphia on the same street. Crowds would follow them; it would make the papers, and the evening news. When these two throw in Athens, there are no crowds and no press.”

“While watching them throw and train, Adam said to me, ‘Well are you going to throw?’” Ossman recalls. “I didn’t have my throwing stuff with me, but did some throws with what I had on. Gradually, I worked up to training with the big boys and Coach Babbitt at least once a week during my throwing season. I starting entering local meets and was once again hooked into the sport.”

Ossman’s return to competition at the 2004 Georgia State Games resulted in victory. “I recall my wife Faith saying, ‘When did you learn to do this?’ My wife was 10 when I stopped throwing the shot in college. So she had no knowledge of my sports past and what was to come.”

One thing throwing did for Ossman was give his training focus. “Instead of spinning my wheels with what do I need to do, how many reps, cardio, etc., I was able to gear my training toward my event,” he says. “Adam Nelson, who I truly call a friend, among other things (!), suggested a few off season training regimens that were a big help. Access to pros like Adam and Don Babbitt is immeasurable.”

To enhance his focus, Ossman became a Certified Fitness Trainer. “I am my biggest and only client,” he says laughingly. “The more knowledge, the better athlete and person I can become. I wish I had learned some of this stuff when I was in my twenties and thirties, but then again it makes getting older a bit easier, don’t you think?”

“I think it’s important to have a passion, a hobby, that is away from what you do professionally. I think it adds that balance that makes life fun,” states the father of two boys, Grant, age 10, and Parker, age 9. “Now my family watches me throw. Nothing like the sound of ‘Come on daddy’ coming from your sons.”

Ossman is frequently asked, “What is it like to throw with Adam Nelson and Reese Hoffa? You must learn a lot!”

His standard reply is, “Well yes, I know exactly where the 70 foot mark is and how to rub chalk on my neck.”

Nelson and Ossman have become friends to the extent they talk about life as much as the shot putting. “He is a study in the complete shot putter,” Ossman says of Nelson. “Committed to excellence, with an emphasis on the correct balance of strength, flexibility, nutrition and performance in the ring. I keep that in mind when I have trouble touching my toes in the morning. He has also experienced the extremes in the sport, and that makes what he has to say more credible for sure.”

“Thrower’s guru Don Babbitt has been a great help, too,” continues Ossman. “During his time watching Adam and Reese, Don has always had advice to help this old shot putter try to turn into a spinner. It’s been a long and slow process, but to Don’s credit he never once suggested for me to take a closer look at competing in something less challenging, like dominoes on line.”

“I really enjoy competing at my age, and looking forward to it for years to come. I have made some new friends, and enjoy watching others my age and older set no limits on their abilities.”

“In the year or so after college, I did throw in a couple meets,” says Johns. “My best post-college throw in the shot put was 52’0”. My best in the discus right out of college was something like 150-55 I

think. My work really made it impossible to train in the early years—and so from 1981 to about 1985 or so, I didn’t throw.”

“Then NBC started a corporate track team, and I got back into it. It was a great thrill for me because I missed competing so much. So it was the US Corporate Athletic Association (USCAA) that got me going again. It’s just a fantastic organization that puts on meets every year.”

Johns best in the USCAA meets is 49’6” and his best in the discus is approximately 148’.

Johns’ busy schedule makes time to work out a big issue. The biggest time crunch came when he decided to go to law school from 1998 through 2002. He had approximately 70-80 pages of dense reading and case briefing to do virtually every night. If he had too much to do in a day, the workouts were what suffered most.



Johns (above) and Ossman on the job.



“I still have a lot of difficulty getting into a regular training routine because of the travel and crazy hours associated with my job,” he says. “I’m extremely inconsistent as a thrower- I think because my training is inconsistent. I also came to the sport during the time when people started converting from the glide to the spin in the shot. So I practiced both. In college, I was pretty consistently, but not always, a glider. But these days, sometimes I’m not feeling the glide, then the spin works and vice versa. I’m pretty sure that if I worked out and threw consistently, I’d do nothing but spin, but I don’t.”

“These days, if I get into the 44 foot range in the shot (16 lbs.) I’m doing pretty good for me, which is frustrating,” continues Johns. “In the disc I get great practice throws (when I practice) and a lot of sector fouls. But the 120’s to about 135’ is the best I’ve done in a meet over the last few years. I was consistently in the 130’s at least until I had shoulder surgery in December 2004. That has affected my throwing. The operation was on my non-throwing shoulder, but for a long time after, it was hard to get a good pull because of pain, spasms and general weakness that only recently subsided. My doctor told me it could take years to get going again and I’m on track I think. Fact is, the throwing was what caused the problem in the first place. Excuses, yes. But that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

“Throwing is now my excuse to try to stay in shape,” says Johns. “It motivates me and keeps up the intensity in my lifting and running. Like many throwers who may have also participated in other sports like football and basketball, it’s hard for me to get the adrenaline and intensity going for a workout unless there is an underlying competitive goal. My goal is to keep throwing competitively. After all, I suck at golf.”

“I work out to throw,” Johns continues. “In high school and college I didn’t win throwing events because I was stronger than everyone else. I won, when I won, because of a speed/power combination. So when I train to this day, I have to run and lift. I have to do sprints, and even some distance, plus the Olympic lifts, or some combination thereof, if I want to reach goals in meets. This helps me keep in shape. I have two kids now, so when I work out I have to figure out how to include them. For example, we have a jogging stroller. When I go running, I take my son along for the ride.”

### Looking Forward

“What’s awesome here is my wife is a lawyer who ran track in high school and really holds her own in the gym,” he says, thinking of turning 50 next year. “We’ve used the

same trainer to work out with and we’re now thinking about hiring a new trainer. So hopefully we’re getting ready to take this thing up to the next level.”

“I know I am going to get much better in my event,”

Ossman says. “I am still learning. What a great thing to say at the age of 49! Now it’s just a matter of how much work am I willing to put in to reach my goals. I do know that I am really looking forward to the weight of the shot to come down to 6K (he turns 50 on June 18, 2007). What I will do now is concentrate on the technical more so than strength. That is where the biggest growth will be in the coming years. What is great about my situation is that I am still learning and I have a lot of potential left. Most people I compete against have their technique and I envy them. Just makes me work that harder to get my act together.”



Ossman, left (with Warren Taylor (center) and Robert Carr) finished second in the M45 shot at the 2006 Masters Nationals.

Both men are shining examples of the good in Masters throwing. They’re successful professionally and athletically. \*LSTJ\*