

See How She Runs: Marion Jones and the Making of a Champion

Ron Rapoport

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Marion Jones is one of those world-famous Americans that Americans have yet to discover. The world's fastest woman, she is accorded celebrity treatment in Europe, where she has been mobbed by autograph-seeking fans at international track meets. Yet the sprinter and long-jumper trains in relative obscurity in Raleigh, North Carolina, where few outside the track world have heard of her. That's all about to change—if her performance goes as predicted—at the 2000 Summer Olympics when track and field receives its quadrennial spotlight from the nation's television networks.

Jones, a former collegiate basketball star and a track phenomenon since junior high, could win as many as five gold medals in Sydney. Her amazing talent, combined with good looks, intelligence and charisma already have made her the darling of sports marketers placing their bets on the athletes most likely to grace a box of post-Olympics Wheaties. Craig Masback, CEO of USA Track and Field, puts Jones in a category with Pele, Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan, saying she “has the chance to be the first female international athlete to transcend sports.”

If that's the case, this is the book that will be flying out of stores come September. Rapoport, an award-winning sport columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times, delivers the goods on Jones' astonishing career. He begins with her childhood in California, when Jones consistently outran boys years older than she and had to quit her Little League team because she so outshone the boys that parents on opposing teams encouraged pitchers to hit her. In high school, she excelled at both track and basketball, and in her freshman year at University of North Carolina, she led her basketball team to the women's NCAA national championship. After her senior season at UNC, Jones realized she would have to choose between basketball and track. She went back to her first love, began training with a new coach and set the track world on fire in her first full-time season on the circuit.

Fans who cringe at the soap-opera-style coverage network television gives Olympic athletes will be delighted with this book. The focus is on the sport, not scandals, childhood traumas or long-suffering blind mothers dying of cancer who drive their little prodigies to practice at 4 a.m. every morning while eating cat food to pay for lessons. Rapoport, however, delivers plenty of drama on the field and court with his play-by-play coverage of key contests and his chronicle of Jones' incredible 1999 track season.

The big drama is yet to come, in Sydney, where Jones could make history and shatter Florence Griffith Joyner's world record in the 100 meters.

SHARON FLESHER (May / June 2000)

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