

Track and Field



Earl Bell



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Friend in Deed

Who is Earl Bell? He is only the best pole vaulter in America now, with a vault of 18' 4½" to his credit in 1977—better than any other American.

As a 20-year-old student at Arkansas State U. in Jonesboro, he had his moment in the sun. The date was May 29, 1976, and Earl was participating in the U.S. Track and Field Federation championships at Wichita, Kansas. He took his only warm-up vault at 17' 6" and cleared the bar by what looked like a foot. Though the competition had started at 16' 6", Bell did not join until the bar reached 17' 6". Just as he had done in practice, he cleared the height easily. One more vault and Bell was the only competitor left. He ordered the bar raised to 18' 7¼". After loosening up and preparing himself mentally, Bell raced down the runway, planted the pole and catapulted over the crossbar, grazing it ever so slightly. He lay on his back in the pit pleading with the bar to stay up. When it did, Earl leapt out of the pit with joy, for he had just broken the world record. The mark of 18' 6½" had been set by Dave Roberts of the Florida Track Club. Now Bell had bettered that mark by ¾" and was the new world record holder.

Less than a month later, on June 22, Bell and Roberts met face to face in the Olympics Trials at Eugene, Ore. Both were still in the competition when the bar was placed a 18' 8¼"—a world record height. On his first attempt, Roberts shattered his pole. Bell failed in three tries, and in a spirit of sportsmanship, lent his pole to Roberts. Roberts then cleared the height and recaptured the world record from Bell. Bell and Roberts were together again in Montreal for the Olympic Games, but the reunion was anything but happy as Bell could not get any higher than 17' 10½" in the rain which flooded the pole vault competition.

Roberts, using his own pole this time, did not do much better, and had to settle for third with a vault of 18' ¾". Earl Bell, with no world record and no Olympic medal to his credit, did not sit around and sulk the following season. Throughout 1977, he was working hard at being the best vaulter in North America, with his sights set on Moscow and the 1980 Olympic Games.

EARL BELL

Born Aug. 25, 1955, in Ancon, Panama Canal Zone

Bell is still flying high