



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in *Pact's Point of View* © 1997
Do not reprint without permission.

Pact Family Stories Up Close and Personal with Dan O'Brien The World's Best Athlete Interviewed by Gail Steinberg



BACKGROUND:

Dan O'Brien, age 30, the first American since Bruce Jenner to win the Olympic decathlon gold medal (1996 in Atlanta), was adopted transracially when he was two years old. Daniel Dion O'Brien was born on July 18, 1966, in Portland, Oregon, to an African American birth father and a Finnish birth mother. He was adopted by Jim and Virginia O'Brien, a White couple from the rural town of Klamath Falls, Oregon, and grew up on a farm with seven brothers and sisters, five of them adopted across racial lines: Karen is Native American; Patricia is biracial; Tom is Latino; and Sarah and Laura are Korean. Dan's talent at sports earned him a scholarship to the University of Idaho, but when he got to college he discovered that he liked partying more than the rest that school had to offer. Unprepared for the lack of structure of life on his own, as he moved into his twenties he remained a rowdy teen. He flunked out of school, got into a couple of minor brushes with the law, and received second — and third and fourth and fifth — chances from his parents and coaches — until he finally got back on track.

But by early 1992, Dan, then 25, was the reigning world champion in the decathlon, the grueling, two-day, 10-event test of speed, power, endurance and will that historically determines the world's greatest athlete. He and his rival Dave Johnson became nationally known that year as the focus of Reebok's entertaining twenty-five million dollar advertising campaign that asked "Who is the world's greatest athlete... Dave or Dan?.. to be settled in Barcelona." But with the world's attention focused on him in the qualifying trials in New Orleans, Dan missed three times in the pole vault ("no-heighted," in track talk), failing even to make the U.S. team. Here, we offer Dan's account of his story, with a special focus on the role played by adoption and race in his life.

MESSAGE FOR KIDS:

Try everything! Don't give up!

Q. Sometimes adopted kids struggle with low self-esteem and have a bigger struggle than most when things don't go right. More than anything, you've proven you have the ability to look forward, not back — to turn failure to success. You picked yourself up and didn't quit when many others would have. Where do you think that resilience comes from? What gave you the strength to fail and yet not give up?

A. Through everything I've gone through— and I've been everywhere, at the top of the world, in jail, hung over drunk — I never gave up my dream of winning a gold medal in the Olympics. There was never a day I didn't think I could do it. If there had been, I might have quit. But I figured, hey, if I want it bad enough and I decide to get off the couch and go run, I can do it. When I "no-heighted" in New Orleans in '92, I felt like I was in a bad dream. It was just total disbelief. I couldn't comprehend it. I felt lost and left out. I was thinking, what am I going to do with my life? I had reached a dead end, lost everything. I finished the events and didn't make any excuses, but I was dying inside. I didn't want to look bad. For a week or so afterward, I didn't want to be near anybody. When I came home, I had 35 messages on my answering machine saying, "I feel really bad for you." I wanted to scream, "Shut up! I don't want to hear it." But after talking to my coaches and sponsors and having a good cry, I came to understand something important: that's just the way it is in athletics. The failure showed me how committed I really am. I'm a person who looks forward, not back. I knew I had to work harder, that's all. All I want to do is get better as the days go by.

My resilience comes from wanting to be a happy person — everything I do is always about trying to find a solution. As a young child, I was never a crier. I never cried to get my way, or even when I was in pain. I always wanted to stay out of trouble, but as an adopted child, I was constantly trying to find out who I was. What was I going to be when I grew up? I was never sure which way to turn, and I wanted to take charge of a life that wasn't mine from the beginning.

One thing that helped me a lot as a kid was that I tried everything because I wanted to challenge myself. I played music, played sports, tried to be a politician. That's my advice: Try anything! If you never give up, you'll be successful. Take pride in exactly what it is you do and remember it's okay to fail as long as you don't give up.

I like to read about adverse situations. If I were a politician, I'd want to find a way to stop all wars. I do whatever I can to resolve conflict and I can't sit still. There are things in life I want and I've never given up on them. I want to have a family...a nice home.

MESSAGE TO PARENTS:

Teach the work ethic.

Q. How did your parents help you?

A. I think what my parents did was perfect. They were strict, concerned about my safety and held me back just a little. Without them, I might have ended up conceited. They taught me to try harder and that hey, you have to work for it. It wasn't until I was in my early 20's that I really began to see what kind of person I was going to be. I knew from the beginning I didn't want to live on a farm like my parents. Our family seemed to work harder than other families. I wanted to live in a city. I wanted to do sports. My Dad worked extremely hard. I looked up to my best friend's dad, who was an airline pilot.

But when I played sports, Dad was very interested. That helped me get better. Sports was a place where I could give it everything and not get into trouble. I would go out and run and run and run on the farm. When I was seven or eight, he got me a pitch-back machine. When I was little, I wasn't allowed to put sugar on my breakfast cereal because it made me so hyper. Now I take medication for ADD but back then, before I learned to focus, I could get too wild. I learned from my Dad the benefit of determination and giving it your all.

Mom would tell me, not everyone can make it. She'd say hey, be careful. She didn't want me to get my hopes up and get disappointed. I used to tell her I was going to be a professional athlete and she'd ask me what kind of real job I was going to get. I remember saying "What do you expect me to do? Work for the rest of my life?" She did — but I always knew I was going to

be a professional athlete. I liked fitting in with the team. Throughout my entire life, things have happened that kept me working toward the goal. I learned to try harder and to accept that I've always got things to work on. When I lost in '92, Mom sent me a letter. It was really important. I knew I could face anything in my life after that. If I'd won then, it would have been too easy.

I think my family is my first concern after myself. I'm very close to Mom and Dad and to my brother Tom. We are the two closest in age. Not that it was always smooth sailing. When I was a kid, I internalized everything, kept my feelings to myself. My Mom says that when I first came to the family, it was like somebody had taught me not to cry. I'd make noises like I was crying, but no tears would come out. I didn't feel comfortable hugging and expressing affection. Now that I'm older and have a soul mate, someone who understands me truly, I can express what I'm feeling when it's happening. Her name is Leilani Sang. We've been together three years. We both grew up in Oregon. She's not adopted but she grew up in a step-family situation.

Q. Do you think of yourself as a competitive person?

A. I'm very competitive and always have been, but I'm learning to work my hardest instead of putting in minimum effort to succeed. I used to look forward to Little League games, high school basketball, and softball. It was all I could think about. As a young athlete, it was first about having fun; then it was about winning. Now it's about pushing myself to the limit. I've learned it hurts just the same, whether you're pushing a little extra or not. That's what's preserved me. The more focused I get, the more I can compete well under stress. Athletes have certain inclinations; one is to fail at any cost. You don't know why: you just have to lose by maybe only a point or two. I want my inclination to be performance-oriented — if you do the performance correctly, suit up and go through all the right moves, you've got to succeed.

Q. What made you chose the decathlon as your event?

A. I've always been very good at all sports. I played football in the fall, ran cross- country. I always wanted to be everywhere at once. Maybe I wanted to be the center of attention, or wanted not to be left out of anything. Since the decathlon is not so dominant in the United States right now, I saw a chance to be successful. The decathlon includes ten separate events and they all matter. You can't work on just one of them. You don't have to be the best in all ten disciplines; instead, you need to work at being steady and consistent steady. Rick Sloan, one of my coaches, says it's like juggling balls, keeping them all up there at the same time. No other competition requires as much speed, strength, versatility and focus. You need to

become more than one type of athlete. You have to be a sprinter, a weight man and a distance guy all in one.

I like total fitness. I take pride in being in the hardest event, knowing so well how it works that I can do it on a rainy day, without thinking about it, without feeling pain. You have to be able to be a good loser. You have to be okay knowing you're going to fail every day in something without getting mad and upset. That hurts you. I was a late bloomer, so thirty is a good age for me to peak. I have more aches and pains now, but I'm able to manage them better. What motivates me is feeling good about myself. I love the bouncy feeling when everything is going great. Sometimes I feel so good; other times nothing works. And there is such a thing as a decathlon high. It's like a rock rolling down hill, picking up momentum. You get better and better. There is nothing better than having a personal-best day, being in shape and pushing myself beyond my own limits.

MESSAGE TO THE COMMUNITY

"I call myself a chameleon."

Q. Can you talk some about your feelings about race and culture?

A. I'm interested in all kinds of culture. When I went to Hawaii, I was very impressed with the culture. When I met Mohammed Ali and his family, I was really interested in their history and culture. I'm also interested in Native American history. To me, the decathlon is its own little society and I am part of that culture.

In college, people thought of me as African American, and I tried to fit in, but it didn't work out. I failed. I wish I'd learned more about African American culture growing up. Over the last five years, I've become me. I feel a special connection to mixed-race kids. It's important for me to think I'm mixed-race. I found strength in others who are mixed-race or adopted, like Greg Louganis and Scott Hamilton. At one meet, a father brought over a four-year-old and said, "Look, this is Dan O'Brien. His mom was White and his dad was Black and he's okay." I guess his son was being ridiculed for being mixed. I want to try to understand what kids like me are going through. Part of my curiosity is understanding why I am not being accepted: "too Black to be White; too White to be Black." I'm more accepted in the White community than in the Black. It's confusing, more than anything. I didn't date Black girls until four years ago. Now I have close Black friends.

I call myself a chameleon. I can always give people anything they want. That's been one of the goals I've had for a girlfriend, to find someone able to fit into every situation the way I can. Once, when a waitress came up to me, I knew in five minutes that she was adopted. She wasn't afraid to talk. She was able to really listen

and get what I was thinking and she was mixed-race. It was really interesting. If you're adopted, you need to be a good communicator. It's a strength that comes from growing up adopted. You have to be able to get your message across and you have to know how to listen.

Q. Do you have any role models?

A. It's really important to me to have people I look up to. I'm on a mission to find and fulfill my destiny and it's a mission I can succeed at because I've come to realize the fabled heroes are just normal men. Meeting people like Milt Campbell, Mohammed Ali, Bruce Jenner, Rafer Johnson, Bill Toomey, Bob Mathias — it's a great honor which has made me realize something important: I can do this; they're just like me. It took me time to realize that the men who won Olympic gold medals in the decathlon are just men, just like me. They feel pain. They have fears and make mistakes. They don't have to be Superman. They just have to want it really bad. Just like me.

MESSAGE TO THE FUTURE

Encourage Kids!

Q What are your goals? Is there anything you personally hope to do to make the system change?

A. My personal goal is to be the first to break the 9000-point barrier in the decathlon and I won't stop until I succeed. It's very important to me, because I feel I wouldn't be reaching my potential if I didn't. You just don't do any higher than being proclaimed the world's greatest athlete. It really means a lot that I won the gold medal — but I woke up the next morning expecting to feel different. I felt the same. That was really interesting. It wasn't until recently that I felt I was doing everything I could for myself. Everybody was always helping me because of my talent. In the beginning, I wanted to compete because I didn't have anything else. Then I really asked myself, Why am I still doing this? I realized I want to do the best I can. I know that other people want me to succeed as much as I do, but they have too great a stake in it. Now I'm fighting for control of my time, my money, my appearances.

I established the Dan O'Brien Youth Foundation to show kids it's cool to get your work done instead of goofing off and being a jerk. There are three programs: The Citizenship Decathlon, a ten-week program modeled after the decathlon; the Work Hard In School Program for at-risk kids; and the Summer Decathlon Challenge. They all offer programs that provide strategies to "turn failure into success." I'm doing all I can to encourage kids to get interested in the decathlon. Anybody who wants more information can write to me at: Dan O'Brien, PO Box 9244, Moscow, Idaho 83843.