



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of TONIE CAMPBELL



Written by JS (02/2014), reformatted by JS (07/2014)

The following was published in the February 2014 issue of Model Aviation magazine, in the "I Am the AMA" section. The interview was conducted by Jay Smith.

I Am the AMA

Tonie Campbell, Three-time US Olympic track and field athlete, Olympic medalist

JS: How did you get involved with model aviation?

TC: I dreamed of becoming an astronaut and pilot, but my eyes went bad at the age of nine. My parents supported my dreams although they knew my eyesight would probably halt my pursuit of flying.

Every Christmas and birthday I received model airplane kits. Building airplane progressed into flying small Control Line planes, then gliders, Slope Soarers, nitro-powered aircraft, and now electric jets. My next step will be turbine jets.

I went to flight school, learned how to fly, and obtained my pilot's license. I am certified to fly five aircraft including one high-performance, twin-engine plane and have done 10 hours of acrobatic flying.

JS: How has model aviation impacted your life and/or career?

TC: Model aviation is my most enjoyable activity for stress reduction and to meet new and interesting people. Now that I coach/teach for a living, I love to share my experience with others and help introduce them to the sport. I take the time to answer questions or allow a young child to touch and explore one of my planes. It's a great conversation starter and a wonderful way to meet people

JS: What disciplines of modeling do you currently participate in?

TC: I have owned cars, boats, and a helicopter or two, but my love is fixed-wing aircraft – fast with thrust screaming out of a narrow exhaust tube. I have more than 20 EDF/nitro-powered, ducted-fan jets. If it's fast and doesn't have a propeller, I want it!

JS: What are your other hobbies?

TC: I enjoy outdoor activities such as golfing, biking, and scuba diving; however, nothing gives me the same thrill as the feeling of running over hurdles at breakneck speeds. Time has taken its toll on my body, so although I can still get over a hurdle, I have found that writing, creating, and having a story or novel published comes close.

JS: Who (or what) has influenced you most?

TC: I grew up in Southern California, where we enjoy 12 months of great weather. On any weekend, you can see the latest technology, kits, and some pioneers of the sport, flying and testing the next new product. In the late '70s and '80s, I met Larry Wolfe of Jet Hangar Hobbies (JHH) and his son, Chris.

Larry built and flew model planes for movies such as *Iron Eagle*. When I saw his ducted-fan kits, I had to have one. I have owned five JHH jets and have become good friends with Chris, who mentors me and teaches me something new each time we fly together.

JS: How did you get involved in hurdling?

TC: I had never dreamed of becoming an Olympic track and field athlete, let alone becoming an Olympic medalist. I had dreams of being an LA Dodger.

My friends convinced me to go out for the track team. My plan was to join the team, get some running tips, then return to baseball and try to earn an athletic scholarship.

I wasn't fast, so I couldn't do the sprints. I wasn't strong, so the throwing events were out, too. Running distance races wasn't an option, which left only the hurdle events.

I had long legs, I could jump over things, and only a few guys were willing to try them! I knew I could do the low hurdles (30 inches). However, I did not want to run the high hurdles (39 inches); they looked insanely dangerous.

While I was explaining to the coach how I appreciated him allowing me to try out for the team and that I would only be running the low hurdles, the team captain overheard the conversation. He called me a few choice words, and gave me a hard shove backward.

I began to fall and spun around to catch myself or at least fall face down, but to my surprise a high hurdle was set up and a quick decision was made to jump instead of falling into the barrier. As I sailed over the wood and steel obstacle, I fell "in love at first flight" with the high hurdles.

(Ed. Note: Tonie competed in the 1984 Olympics, and won the bronze medal in the 110-meter hurdles during the 1988 Olympics.)

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