

Meet a Model Track Star

Gea Johnson of Arizona State is the NCAA heptathlon champion

and also a photogenic career-person-to-be | by LEO W. BANKS



TIM DEFENICO/ALLSPORT USA

GEA JOHNSON IS LEAFING THROUGH some magazines. The 23-year-old Arizona State senior is the country's finest collegiate heptathlete, and she's looking at her own image on the covers of *Runner's World*, *Flex* and *Varsity*. "Now, let's see if I can find the *National Examiner*," says Johnson. From another room in the family's Tempe home, her mother, Sally, wails, "No! Not that!" But sure enough there's Gea, standing before a cactus, wearing a unitard and looking beautiful. Immediately adjacent is a headline for a separate story: A WOMAN'S LOVING PETS TURN INTO DOGS OF DEATH.

Curious things happen to a world-class athlete who also happens to have a burgeoning modeling career.

In the Valley of the Sun, Johnson pops up everywhere—on billboards, in newspaper ads. She shares her image for free with Ramada Inn hotels, Busch beer and RC Cola among other products. Since she is the NCAA's reigning heptathlon champion, and because she hopes to defend her title May 29–June 1 at the nationals in Eugene, Ore., she must maintain her amateur standing. "I know I've lost a lot of money by having to turn things down, but I wouldn't give up being an NCAA champion for a million dollars," says Johnson.

"I love modeling, but track is my focus right now."

Keeping that tight focus has paid off. Last year, Johnson won the NAAs with a score of 6,132, the third-highest ever by a collegiate American. In that championship season she broke eight Arizona State heptathlon records and was ranked second in the nation, behind Jackie Joyner-Kersey, by *Track & Field News*.

During her California girlhood Johnson was more interested in swimming than in running and jumping. When her parents divorced in 1981, she moved with her mother and four siblings to Tempe. In high school Johnson began to excel at track. In her senior year she was named class president, homecoming queen, Ms. National Fitness, Ms. Teenage Arizona Bodybuilding and winner of the Dial Award as the nation's outstanding female scholar-athlete. At Arizona State she was a 1990 GTE Academic All-America and in four years has received only one grade below A. She is a perfectionist; she's still upset about that B and considers her winning performance at last year's NCAA meet to be "sub par. I was happy to win, but not satisfied. I never am."

Whether competing in the high jump or posing trackside, Johnson is a study in grace and poise.



TONY DUFFY/ALLSPORT USA

"When Gea competes, she's out to kill," says Sally Johnson, who often counsels her daughter to slow down. Tom Jones, Johnson's coach, worries that her intensity can work against her. "You have to pull the reins in on her sometimes," says Jones. "Last year she had tendinitis and should've been resting, but she was out there hammering."

Jones was proved right: Johnson should have been resting. She had surgery to reattach a torn tendon in her right knee last September and didn't resume training until February. She reinjured herself in early April, but on May 1 she entered the shot put, javelin and 200-meter events at Arizona State's all-comers meet, and won them all. She insists she's ready to successfully defend her national crown.

If she does, she'll be a sight to see. When Johnson the track star competes, Johnson the model shows up, too. She paints her fingernails and toenails for each meet. She wears a diamond in one ear and a hoop with a Mickey Mouse charm in the other. She wouldn't think of competing without her trademark pink lipstick. Flo-Jo's got nothing on Gea-Jo. "Others tease me—'Oh, I've got Gea lipstick on, it never comes off!'" says Johnson. "Hey, I like to do girlie things. It's important to me to maintain my femininity."

It's important, and could be lucrative, as Johnson hopes to find out soon. After she graduates this month she will spend some quality time with her husband, Greg Joelson, recently signed as a free-agent lineman by the San Francisco 49ers. Then she plans to test the pro-modeling waters in L.A. She wants to take acting lessons, even as she continues training for a shot at the '92 U.S. Olympic team. "I have a chance of being Number One in the world by '96," she says. In this instance she's referring to track, not showbiz. ■

Writer Leo W. Banks described the Oakland A's language program in our May 13 issue.