

Washington's Own Tony Volpentest

"Fastest Man in the World"

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Over the course of 30 years of coaching track and field, I've run into some really special athletes and wonderful people. There are those who demonstrate athletic skills that can only be described as "WOW". There are those athletes who bring a human quality of compassion, leadership and the "it" factor that make them a special part of the team. Then, there is Tony Volpentest.

In 1994, Tony and I crossed paths almost by accident. Tony had graduated from Edmonds Woodway High School, while I was teaching and coaching in the Olympia area. I had seen a story about him on the television show, 48 hours. I was completely blown away by his athletic skills. Here is a guy who had rubbed shoulders with Joe DiMaggio and Arnold Schwarzenegger. He was a 100 and 200 meter world record holder from the Barcelona Paralympics. His gold medals and world records at the Barcelona Paralympics in 1992, simply amazed me. **Oh, by the way, Tony has no hands or feet.** What I would come to learn is what made this champion.

After spending 6 months trying to track him down, my older son had seen a picture of him in Sports Illustrated for Kids. Tony, I found out, lived just 60 miles north of me. I felt like I might have a better starting block to help him out with his start and set up a better acceleration pattern for his 100 and 200. We met at his parents' home in Mountlake Terrace, WA and realized the Moya Block couldn't be hooked to a timing system so it wouldn't work for him. What did come out of the meeting was a relationship being formed between a coach and an athlete.

As months passed by, Tony and I continued corresponding and Tony asked me in 1995, if I'd be interested in coaching him in a comeback effort at the 1996 Paralympics on US soil in Atlanta. The Paralympics are the 2nd largest sporting event in the world, just behind the able-bodied Olympics. The distance apart would definitely pose a problem, so after agreeing to coach Tony, he moved to Federal Way, WA to be closer. With no intention of ever wanting to be paid or expecting to be paid for coaching Tony, he informed me that he had someone who would pay me for coaching him. How often is it that an athlete calls a coach and says, "I have someone to pay you to coach me. Oh, and it's H. Ross Perot." I have a tremendous amount of respect for Mr. Perot. Here was a true American hero. What an honor to be associated with Mr. Perot and Tony. And so the journey began.

I quickly learned that Tony is a champion for more than just his athletic ability. Don't get me wrong, between the chest and knees he was the strongest athlete I've ever worked with, but it was more than just that. He had the desire to be a champion, the focus to be a champion, a supportive family like none other and a willingness to love those around him and make them part of his journey. Bill and Betty Volpentest are simply the greatest in their support of their son.

With 11 months to prepare the work began in earnest. I laid out a plan that would maximize Tony's strengths and correct his weaknesses. The *original blade runner* was up to the task. The sweat and hard work began. The teaching curve would need to be vertical as there was much to learn as we laid out his training plan and racing plans.

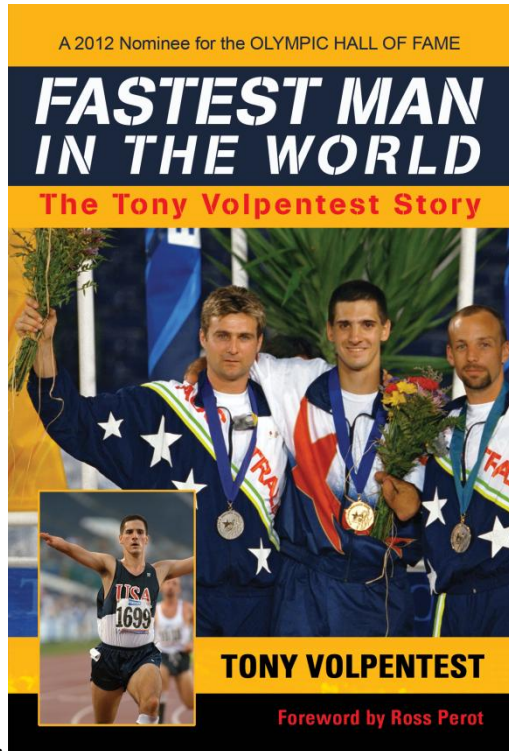
As one record after another fell, the 1996 games were upon us. Tony was ready for the challenge. With Olympic Stadium filled to see Tony, Mr. Perot in attendance and 100's of cameras ready for that finish line shot, Tony dazzled all by breaking the world record. Two days later he won the 200 gold and graced the front page of USA Today. The nation had a hero they could look up to, parents had a role model for their kids and all of Atlanta was abuzz with this super athlete and amazing person.

I vividly remember the night after the 100, when Tony took time to sign autographs for every person wanting one. The smiles and happiness I saw on young kids faces as they got to touch their hero, visit with him and get that coveted autograph was something I'll never forget. What made it more special was watching Tony sign autographs, not because he had to but because he wanted to. He wanted everyone to feel a part of his journey and success.



I'm not sure I realized that Tony would literally catapult the Paralympics to the level that we see today. He was truly a pioneer. Now the Paralympics are mentioned in commercials along with the able-bodied commercials. **Tony played a large part in that happening.**

Tony and I parted ways in 1997 as he later moved to Arizona. Recently on a visit to Phoenix, I called Tony and we rekindled our friendship via the phone and on-line. I came to find out that Tony was just completing his autobiography, as well as possibly plans for a movie of his life. Tony gave me a copy of his book that I immediately read. Having been a part of Tony's life was really special. To read about his life in whole tugged at my heart and emotions and helped me realize why the guy is so special.



It's truly my hope that every coach in the State of Washington will go on www.Tonyvolpentest.com and order a copy of his book. Throughout time, there have been books and stories that captivate and inspire people. The Tony Volpentest story is one that just does that and more. Not only does it captivate and inspire, it also touches your heart in many ways, challenging you to dream big in your life, despite what obstacles you might be facing. This book is more than just the story of the World's Fastest Amputee. It transcends sport and takes you on an inspiring journey about a person who just naturally motivates others to be their best, while also helping others pursue their dreams. Tony makes you part of his story. It's as if you are there living his life right beside him, experiencing and feeling what Tony has felt. In a time in history when people are searching for real heroes, Washington's own Tony Volpentest may be that hero. I highly recommend this book. It's a must read for coaches, teachers, and school children everywhere.

"If you can dream it, you can achieve it." Tony Volpentest

Coach Hoddle is the Director of the Northwest Track and Field Clinic, to be held on Feb. 6 and 7, 2014 at the SeaTac Double Tree Hotel. Tony will be the keynote speaker.