

Up to the first half of the 30s of the XXth century, shot put was an exercise based on a mere translation (moving the body from one place to another), just an aggressive hop forward from the standing position followed by the release; coaches were just beginning to understand the importance of speed, legs action, and of the use of the circle to its full diameter. The pattern of the «new» speedy and explosive shot putter reached its climax twenty years later with Parry O'Brien, who revolutionized the technique starting his action facing backwards. When he came to Italy in 1951 as an AAU champion, he had not yet fully developed his innovating style, who was later adopted in the whole world (in Italy since 1956). He arrived in our country by train from Zurich as a member of an american team who was

touring Europe, and competed on june the 30th in Milan and july the 1st in Bologna. From the first reports of these days, we will find out evidence with which the impression left on the onlookers the ultra-dynamic acceleration and the perfect coordination that later allowed him to further improve his revolutionary technique. The first sport newspaper to introduce this young champion to the italian reading public was

Tuttosport

on june the 28th

, but without technical details, as in Italy we knew nothing of Parry's experiments; the article contained just informations of biographical nature. The first journalist who carefully paid attention to him was Luigi Ferrario, an aged track expert by then working for

Il Corriere dello Sport

, who witnessed a training session at Giuriati field, in Milan: «

O'Brien is an athlete who has attracted our attention in a particular way. He is broad shouldered and has hands with enormous fingers; his little finger is as big as the forefinger of a man of average height. That's why in the grip the iron ball rests entirely within his fingers, and it is thrown only with them too. Though he wore tennis shoes, yesterday he easily went beyond the 15 meters line

» (

Il Corriere dello Sport

30-6-51). From the above reported description we can infer that in Italy we had already got to know one specific detail of the «secret» of this young californian: the stress he put on the use of fingers rather than the up to then more common – at least in our country – palm of the hand. The words written a couple of days later on the sport newspaper printed in Turin, confirm the interest of italian track fans towards that «secret»: «

What impressed us above all, were the concentration and the approach of O'Brien to the competition. Having a look at his physique, nobody would think he is capable of throwing the shot 17 meters, as he did in the United States. Not a giant as other shot putters, baby faced, O'Brien start his action with the implement that rests between shoulder and neck, and produces the final bang by whipping it with the two last phalanges of his fingers, a method that our coaches would never recommend to adopt»

(Renato Morino,

Tuttosport

2-7-51). Our shot putters should know something about that aspect too, as the following day the same chronicler reported

the following story: «

We should meditate about what Angiolone Profeti, italian shot put record holder, told us saturday at dinner. Well, Profeti narrated that Dalla Fontana (personal best of 13.85) tried to imitate O'Brien, delivering the ball with his fingers instead that with the palm of the hand, as it is customary in our country. The result was that he is still suffering from the effect of that attempt, as his hand turned upside down producing a sharp pain in his whole forearm

» (Renato Morino,

Tuttosport

3-7-51).

And here are the sensations Parry stirred up in a chronicler from Milan, who underlined the specific skill of the US champion: «*O'Brien is the prototype of the agile thrower: not overweight, powerful but quick. Watching him running on the grass of the field during the warm-up was an astonishing experience; apart for the big frame, you would have thought he was a sprinter*

» (Gian Maria

Dossena,
dello Sport

La Gazzetta

1-7-51). «

Parry O'Brien is for real. He is a true athlete, not just a heavy eater like the strong men of our country. He showed such an explosiveness that nobody can doubt about his capability to get close to 18 meters within a couple of years. Being so young, he is not yet such a solid and reliable performer as Jim Fuchs (n. 1 in the world at shot put in those years); as a matter of fact he run out of gas after the first meeting in Milan, losing concentration, and in Bologna he barely managed to reach 16 meters. This notwithstanding, he showed a perfect coordination and never lost momentum; we can assess that his qualities are almost as good as those in possession of Rhoden and Attlessey, the best ones among the athletes we had the pleasure of admiring in Milan and Bologna

» (Gian Maria Dossena,

La Gazzetta dello Sport

3-7-51).

The sensation Parry stirred up in the journalist of the sport newspaper printed in Bologna were much alike: « *The outstanding quality of this thrower is his speed; that's where is the secret of his exceptional results*

» (Renato Dotti,
Stadio

2-7-51). «

O'Brien, nineteen years old shot putter from the university of Southern California, is incredibly perfect from an athletic point of view, but he doesn't look like a shot putter. When he changes into civilian dress, you would hardly guess he is a strong man capable of tossing the 16-lb iron ball 17 meters. It is only watching him delivering the shot in the 7 feet circle that you can understand. On sunday O'Brien could not throw as he is capable of. It was a humid evening, and the ball slipped out of his hands, but you could anyhow perceive the tremendous power of his release

» (Renato Dotti,
Stadio

3-7-51).

The italian track and field athletics federation, in its official magazine, published an essay about the americans written by Giorgio Oberweger, head coach of the national team and himself an expert of throwing (bronze medallist at discus in the 1936 Olympic Games): his bio-mechanical analysis labelled Parry's action as the absolute top at shot putting: « *O'Brien, a newcomer with a neat style, well built but not a giant, put up a splendid representation of how to direct properly into the shot the summation of forces involved, during his first performance, on june the 30*

. All the details of his action respected the fundamentals of shot putting, from the sneaking approach to the circle to the vehement instant in which he, after a progressive acceleration, releases the implement: a wild power kept under perfect control. The start, a phase in which he maintained a relaxed attitude, was followed by a glide that gave rise to a flashing progression of movements in which all his muscles worked in synergy and at their best. The explosion of the muscular strength of each one of the segments involved was simultaneous, with hip, shoulder, arm and hand all taking advantage of the dynamic energy generated by the bouncing rhythm of his agile and powerful legs. Automatism and style that owe much of their efficiency surely to years of physical education, continuous conditioning and devotion to improve from a technical point of view. This young talent is another pleasant reality that confirms the recurring interesting innovations the United States are producing in the latest years

» (
Atletica

5-7-51).

On the whole, the Parry O'Brien who came to compete in Italy in 1951, was judged positively and aroused keen interest, even though he did not use the technique which would be destined to become the model for all throwers in the following decades.

Le sue 4 gare in Italia nel 1951 – His 4 competitions in Italy in 1951

peso-shot

disco-discus

Milano		30-6
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(1) 16.68

(5) 44.18

Bologna		1-7
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(1) 16.00

(5) 44.37