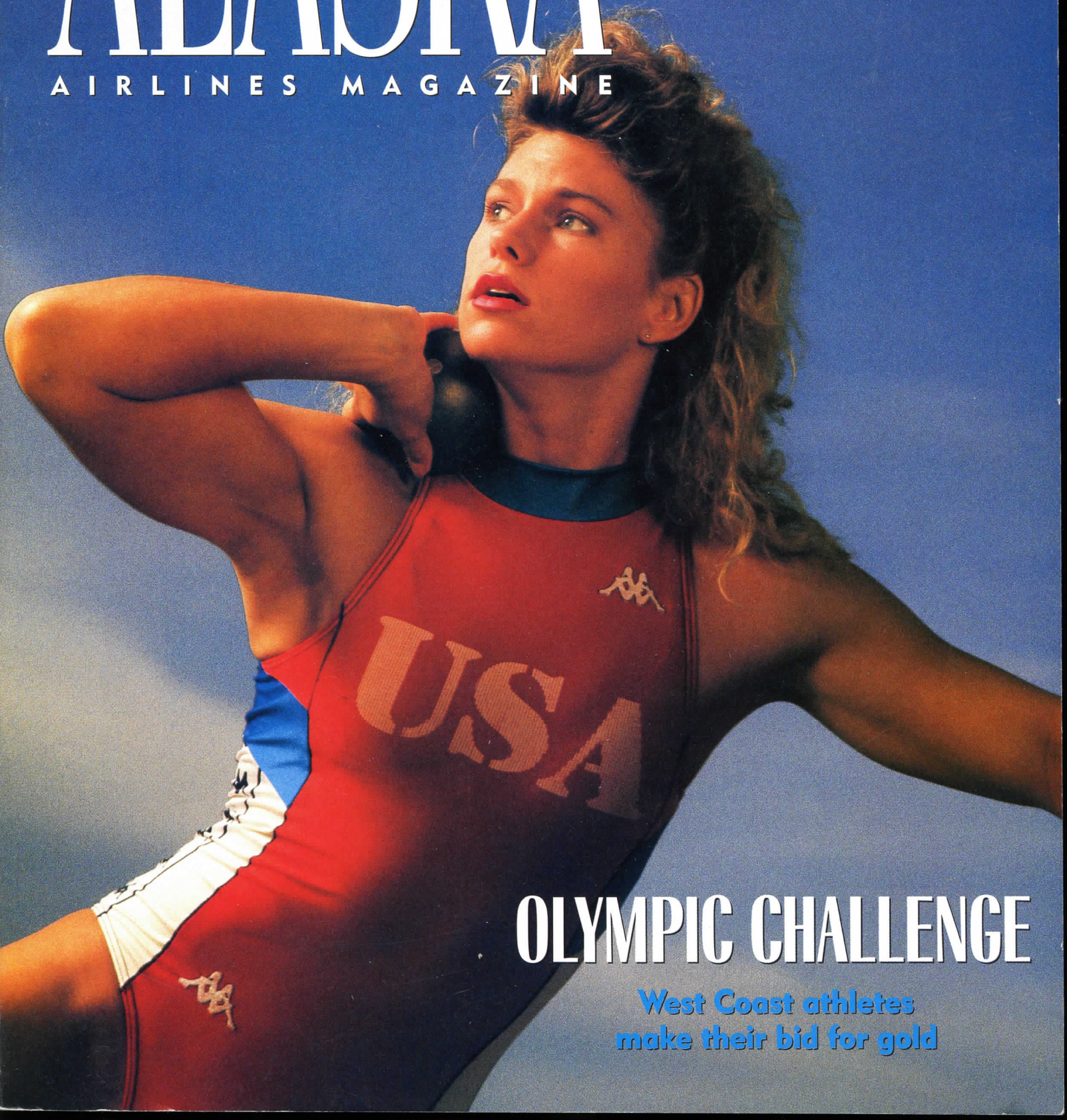


APRIL 1992

# ALASKA

AIRLINES MAGAZINE



## OLYMPIC CHALLENGE

West Coast athletes  
make their bid for gold



man. "But I don't feel intimidated, threatened or under a microscope. I have enough experience now not to worry about that."

Young traveled a hard road out of Watts, meeting whatever challenge he faced. As a walk-on at a prestigious track school, he was ribbed by scholarship athletes, wondering who was this youngster bold enough to believe he could run with them.

He used the pressure to his advantage. "I worked harder to prove I belonged," Young says. He graduated from UCLA in 1989 with a stack of records. As a senior, he ran on the 1,600-meter relay team that broke the three-minute mile, the first and only college relay team to do so. They finished in 2:59.91, setting an NCAA meet record. At the Olympic trials in 1988, he set an all-time UCLA record of 47.72 seconds in the 400-meter hurdles. In 1988, Young won the Jumbo Elliott award, given by the NCAA to the outstanding male and female track and field athletes of the year.

But Barcelona looms large. At Seoul four years ago, Young says he got to the starting blocks before the big race and had a serious attack of nerves. "I was so tensed up," he recalls. "But when I crossed the finish line, I hugged Florence Griffith Joyner, who also went to Jordan High, and I suddenly realized what I'd accomplished. I was elated."

Now, he wants to return—not with something to prove, but with a new mental toughness he believes will help him win. Coach Smith believes it, too. "He still hasn't had that one fantas-

tic race where he's really electrifying," Smith says. "Which is comforting, because I'm seeing improvements, and I know that race is coming."

Young agrees. "When I put that race together," he says, "the world record (47.02) will fall. Hopefully, that will be in Barcelona."

## Gea Johnson *heptathlon*

Everything was going Gea Johnson's way. Her athletic career reached a high-water mark in June 1990, when the then 23-year-old junior at Arizona State University won the NCAA championships in the heptathlon. Her score, 6,132, was the third-highest ever posted by a collegiate American.

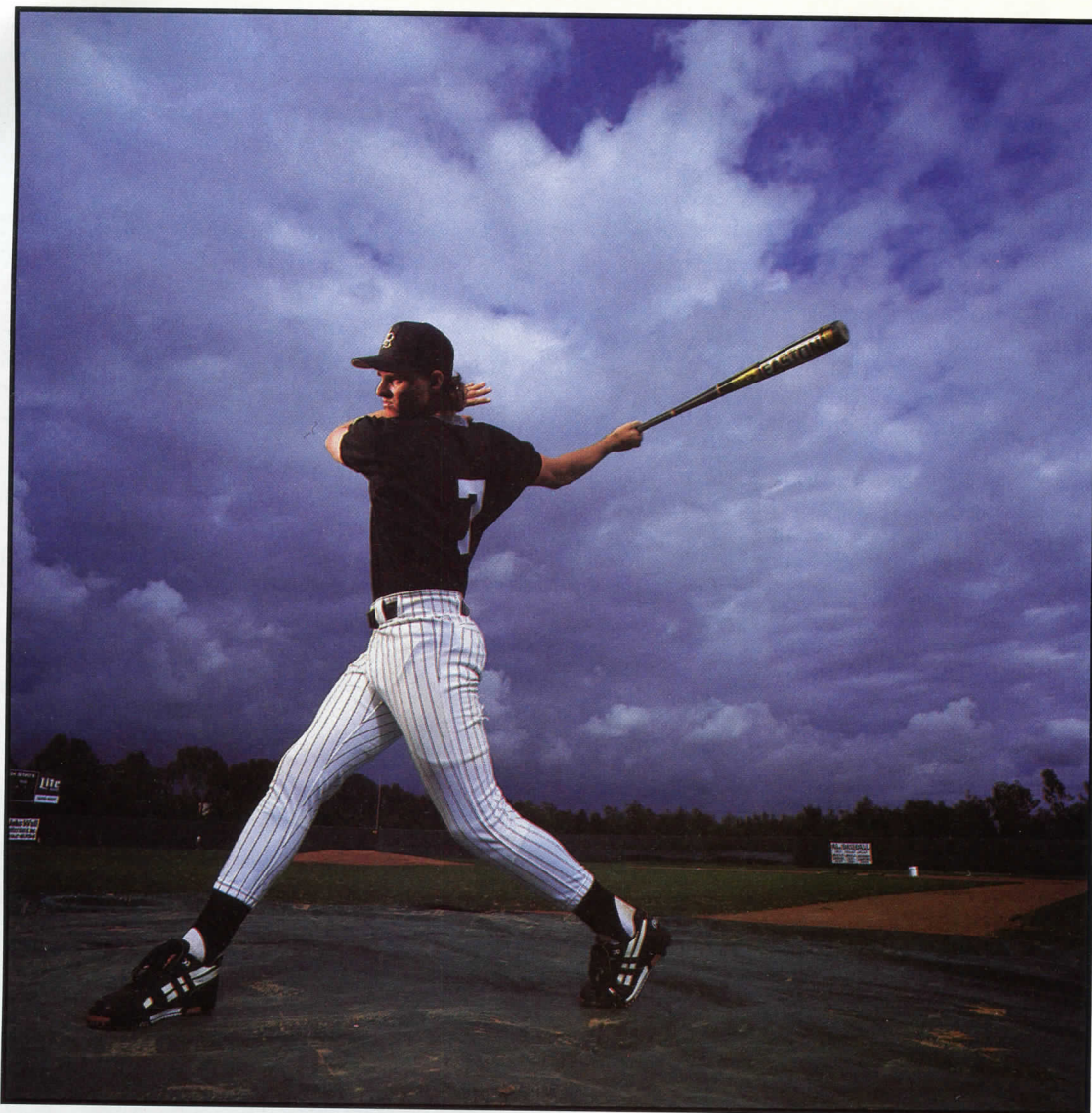
*Track and Field News* ranked her second in the nation behind Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

In addition to athletics, Johnson was cultivating a career in modeling. She was a common sight on billboards and in newspaper ads around Phoenix, and was featured on the covers of eight magazines, including *Runner's World*, *Flex* and *Varsity*. She's even had a couple of movie offers.

She set her sights on repeating as NCAA champ her senior







year, and going to Barcelona in 1992.

Then came Johnson's nightmare. "I was injured for most of 1990, and I trained and competed through it. I thought it was tendonitis, but it was so painful it felt like I had a knife stuck in my knee." It turned out to be a ruptured tendon. She had reconstructive surgery in September 1990, and for 13 months was unable to compete. "My senior year was one of the hardest of my career," Johnson says. "It was really sad watching others compete, because I love it so much. But I have to think that last year didn't exist. I've wiped it out and I'm moving forward."

No one familiar with Johnson's competitive character has ever counted her out. By the time she graduated from Washington High in Phoenix, Johnson had won a dizzying array of awards, including Miss National Fitness Champion, Teenage Arizona Body Building Champion, and the Dial award as the nation's most outstanding female scholar-athlete.

In January, she was a recipient of the NCAA's prestigious Top Six award, honoring her athletic and academic achievement over four years. "I try to reach the highest level I can in whatever sport or activity I'm in," Johnson says. "Even when I won the NAAs, I wasn't completely satisfied. I'm a perfectionist. That's the way I function in everything."

Ironically, that attitude is part of what made Johnson's knee injury so severe. As Tom Jones, her former coach at ASU, says:

"She should've been resting and she was out there hammering it. She's the most motivated athlete I've ever coached, but sometimes you have to pull the reins in on her."

Johnson is training full-time again, and her focus is on the Olympic trials in New Orleans in June. She recently moved to Los Angeles to train under UCLA coaches Bobby Kersee and Art Venegas, and make money as a model, something NCAA rules prohibited when she was at ASU.

But modeling comes second to the Olympics. "It's definitely going to be harder because I've been out so long," Johnson says. "I might've lost a little confidence during that time, but I never once believed the injury would keep me out of the Olympics. I'm determined, I love what I do, and I'm ready to train harder than ever."

## Jason Giambi *baseball*

Three years ago, Jason Giambi was an unheralded high school baseball player whose fondest hope was that a Division 1 school would offer him a scholarship.

Today, he is considered one of the best college talents in the country, with a strong shot at becom-