

Jumper

Waxhaw native leaps into Olympic Games

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this. Focus everything on those few moments when you jump.' That was very inspiring."

In the end, Tillman says, it was God who decided he would be a triple jumper.

"God gave me this talent. I had to supply the hard work to make something of it," he said. "I would never have gotten this far if it weren't for my faith and determination."

Tillman made a jump of 56 feet, 7 1/4 inches during Olympic trials June 23 in New Orleans — third place, qualifying for the team.

That's more than a foot short of the 1988 gold medal jump by Khristo Markov of Bulgaria, who posted a triple jump of 57 feet, 9 1/4 inches.

Tillman's 13-year quest for a chance to participate in the 1992 Olympic games — set for July 25 to Aug. 9 in Barcelona, Spain — has been a long, often bumpy, journey.

"This has been one of the hardest things I've ever tried to do in my life, but I have refused to sell myself short," he said recently.

"Two months ago, I was in a car accident and I was injured. I couldn't lift weights for several weeks, which really messed up my training."

Tillman has had to balance counseling work at Inroads/N.C. Triangle, a career development organization, with demands of home and training. And he has done much of his work without a coach.

"Gale Olson, a jump coach at N.C. State, gives me advice from time to time," he said.

Tillman's love of jumping began when he was 14. He became interested in the sport watching others compete during track meets. After joining Parkwood's team, his first attempts didn't fare well, he says. And upperclassmen criticized his efforts.

But he was determined.

So, he set up a makeshift jumping pit — about 15 feet long, 8 feet wide — in his mother's garden and spent many hours working on long jumps and triple jumps.

The work paid off.

He earned a track scholarship to the University of Tennessee and was named to six All-America teams — indoor and outdoor jumping events.

By March 1988, Tillman was ranked among the top five triple jumpers in the country and wanted to earn a spot on the Olympic team. He also was a graduate student at the University of Texas

at Austin, working on his MBA.

Tillman qualified for the 1988 Olympic trials by beating the 53-foot benchmark, a minimum standard, at numerous meets.

"I wanted to make the team so much," Tillman recalls. "I focused all my energy — all my emotional and physical energy — to attain that goal."

He failed.

"I did not want to come that close and not make the team again," he said. "I felt good going into the Olympic trials this year — confident, but not cocky."

Now the trials are over.

The Olympic games are less than three weeks away and triple jump competition starts Aug. 1. Charlie Simpkins of Murfreesboro, Tenn., who placed first at this year's triple jump trials, and Mark Conley of Fayetteville, Ark., who placed second, will join Tillman's team in Barcelona.

"I'm just going to keep my eyes on the prize," he says. "I've applied that idea to my school and athletics. It's worked pretty good so far."

"I guess you can say, this is a moment of truth. And it's a moment I will never forget."

John Tillman

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■ Age: 27

■ **Work:** Inroads/N.C. Triangle, a career development organization in Raleigh.

■ **Family:** Wife, Dawn, and 5-month-old son.

■ **Home:** Moved to Raleigh in 1990 as a compromise location between Waxhaw and Richmond, where his wife had lived.

■ **Education:** Graduate of Parkwood High School in southern Union County; bachelor's degree in marketing from the University of Tennessee; MBA from the University of Texas, Austin.

■ **Currently studying:** A new triple jump training technique.

■ **Interests, other than jump-**

ing: Music. He has started to record some of his own rap music, mostly socially conscious content.

■ **Dislikes:** "When someone says you can't do this or that in your life. You can do anything you want, if you put your mind to it."

■ **Future:** "I'd like to work to help develop human potential. We all feel at times like we want to quit. We have to focus our desire and determination."

■ **On the Olympics:** "It's both a privilege and an honor to be among the finest collection of athletes ever assembled."