

LET YOUR BACKBONE SLIDE

People laughed at a gangly kid's weird way of jumping. Then they copied him.

WHEN DICK FOSBURY STARTED HIGH jumping as an 11-year-old in Medford, Ore., his coach showed him two ways of clearing the bar, but only one stuck. "I was a lost cause with the standard method," says Fosbury, referring to the "straddle," which required the jumper to push off from his inner leg and roll face-down over the bar. Fosbury preferred the old-fashioned "scissors" technique (which by then—the late 1950s—was seldom used in competition). He would launch himself off his outer foot, slicing his long legs over the bar in a scissoring motion.

But by 1963, Fosbury, then in high school, had reached the limits of this antiquated style; he couldn't get past his personal best of 1.63m. Frustrated, the 16-year-old went to a meet determined to improve. As he leapt over the bar, Fosbury twisted his body, landing belly-up on a heap of wood chips and sawdust—foam pits had not yet been introduced. "I knew that I had to lift my hips up higher, and in order to do that, I had

to move my shoulders back out of the way," he says. Fosbury didn't win, but he did top his personal best by more than 15 centimetres, repeating the result in competition the following week. He had transformed the scissors into a backwards bend he later named the "Fosbury Flop," after a reporter asked him about his method and he recalled seeing the caption of his photo in a local paper: "Fosbury flops over the bar."

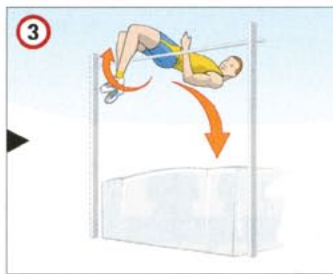
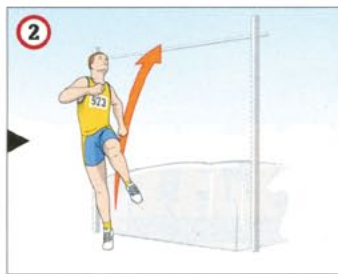
The flop evolved over two years until Fosbury was turning his back to the bar on approach and dropping as much weight as possible below the bar as his body rippled backward. It drew crowds when Fosbury was on the track team at Oregon State—fans would laugh at his goofy technique, which was unlike anyone else's. The attention helped: Fosbury was winning some meets and found himself invited to many others, competing indoors for the first time in 1968 and making the Olympic team. On a sun-drenched October day in Mexico City, the 21-year-old Fosbury sprang backwards in front of a packed stadium, taking the gold medal with a height of 2.24m. The TV broadcast made Fosbury a household name, and within a few years, the flop became the dominant technique.



The current world record of 2.45m was set by a flopper, Javier Sotomayor, in 1993.

The idea of going backwards was actually developed by at least two other people in the '60s, including a teenager from Maple Ridge, B.C., named Debbie Brill. "That's why I believe this is a natural style," says Fosbury. "I'm blessed because I accidentally got the naming rights." **SN**

TRY THIS AT HOME PUT YOUR BACK INTO IT AS YOU LEAP OVER THE HIGH-JUMP BAR



- 1 **RUN** Build momentum by running in a curve toward the bar with long, brisk strides.
- 2 **JUMP** Push off with your outside leg, twisting your body until you face away from the bar. As you bounce up, tilt your head back.
- 3 **FLOP** Arch your back as you cross over the bar. Your head and shoulders will come down first—you'll need to pull your legs up in order to clear the bar.

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