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Olympic Hopefuls Set Their Sights From Chula Vista to Athens

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

From August 13th to 29th, 2004, 10,500 athletes will compete in the 28th Olympiad in Athens, Greece. San Diego's neighbor to the south, Chula Vista, is the proud home of the U.S. Olympic Training Center.

The Center has the honor of being the U.S. Olympic Committee's only warm-weather, year-round, multi-sport training facility. Olympic-caliber athletes from the entire nation devote months, even years of their lives in residence at the Training Center to focus on their goal of qualifying for the Olympics.

According to Diana Kersbergen, Public Information Coordinator of the Training Center, there are currently 40 athletes residing at the Center and about 100 more athletes training there. Kersbergen reports that, as of June 2004, 12 residents had qualified for the Games, as well as the women's softball and men's Paralympic soccer teams. I had the pleasure of interviewing several residents, each blazing a determined trail to Athens, as did the first modern Olympic competitors in 1896.

Native Gal

Leslie Coons, 31, Hammer Thrower

Hometown: San Diego, California

How did you get started throwing the hammer?

"I didn't pick up the hammer until late my sophomore year at Mesa College. I used to throw the javelin. I had started throwing [the javelin] for a youth club when I was at Serra High School. Then in college I had sustained a knee injury in a volleyball play-off game and had to have surgery. And so the only thing I could do was stick the jav back and forth on the field because I was on crutches for two months and then I was in a straight leg brace for another two months.

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“I was a junior javelin thrower at that point; my coach wanted me to focus on jav. But the rest of my team-mates were throwing hammer so it was just a matter of wanting to be part of the team and hang out with my friends.

“But then I received a full scholarship to throw javelin the University of South Carolina, and at that point I wound up having shoulder surgery. I’d torn my rotator cuff throwing jav. [After] doing my rehab, it was just too painful throwing jav anymore. And the hammer was flying farther anyway, so it kind of chose me. From there I got a release from South Carolina and the University of Southern California called me and gave me a full ride to throw hammer for them.”

So how did you get on the road to the Olympics?

“I broke the American record for the first time in 1996, and broke the collegiate record twice the same year. It was at the Golden Bear Invitational held at UC Berkeley. So that was kind of my high point because it was totally unexpected.”

Any other favorite moments?

“Yea. A few years ago, in France. It was my first trip to Europe and there I was competing against someone who was 3rd in the world. I threw my personal record.”

Who has inspired you along the way?

“My coaches at Mesa College were Kent and Ramona Pagel. Ramona Pagel is the American record-holder in shot put. She was my jav coach and we got along really well. She inspired me a lot, pushed me to dig deeper, to go the extra mile.

“My grandfather, Orlando Coons, was also from San Diego, and was the first African-American to compete in the U.S. men’s gymnastics team. He was my coach for my first six years doing gymnastics. A lot of what he tried to tell me [back then], being young and stubborn at the time, is helpful to me now.

“My dad was my coach for several years after college, and a lot of [what I learned from him] is also helping me now.

“But the biggest changes and improvements I’ve made have been since I moved to the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista. Doing that has allowed me to focus on my training and on what I need to do. Right now I’m working with Brooks Johnson. He’s in charge of the high-performance camps [the Center] is running. I receive all the support I need, whether it’s coaching, weight training, sports science, and, of course, the meals and everything. It’s phenomenal. It takes a lot of the stress out of it.”

What do you love most about throwing the hammer?

“Hammer throwing is the most difficult of all the throwing events because you have to combine speed, athleticism, and power, which comes from strength, explosiveness, and being dynamic. You have to have a little bit of finesse in there also. And you have to hold that for four revolutions, and by the fourth turn you’re going very fast. It’s hard to hold your technique when you’re spinning that fast.

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“You also get a certain amount of a rush when you throw hammer. When you hit it right you develop more and more momentum and speed and it feels very powerful. And of course, on the bar throw it’s just relaxed; it feels nice and easy.

“Like today, I threw really well, and with each turn you can feel the force being applied to the hammer and it just builds up more and more until the fourth revolution and the release. It’s just awesome.”

What kind of training do you do these days?

“Most of my training consists of weight training, the medicine ball and throwing the hammers around.”

When will you know if you’ve qualified for the Olympics?

“The trials are on July 15th in Sacramento. I’ll be 31 the day after I find out whether I make the Olympic team, on the 16th.”

Do you have a message for athletes?

“I’ve stumbled a lot with injuries; last year I tore my Achilles and had to sit out the year. But I’m back and I’m on the top of my game again. Perseverance and persistence pay off. No matter how many times you stumble, it’s how you get up that counts.

“Also, I graduated this year from graduate school. So that’s another thing I would want to get across to young athletes; it’s not just about sports. They need to be well-rounded. And as you grow mentally and academically you also grow as an athlete. I got my M.S. in Education with an emphasis in Physical Education from Azusa Pacific, here in San Diego.”

Athens Next for Son of Olympians

Jeff Smoke, 26, Sprint Kayaker

Hometown: Buchanan, Michigan

How did you find your way to sprint kayaking?

“Both my parents were Olympic kayakers also, so I’ve been around it my whole life. The ironic thing is that I really didn’t start seriously training until I graduated from college in 2000. I competed in my first kayak race in 2001, the national championships.

“I had competed in triathlons, swimming, biking and running, for about ten years prior to that, so I was always very active and competitive on a national level, but I had never really kayaked that much. I moved out to the training center in January 2002 to train full-time.”

Did you struggle at all transitioning from triathlons to kayaking?

“It was definitely tough switching sports, going from being really good in triathlons to flipping out of my boat every day, and just learning how to paddle. But once I got past the beginning stages it’s progressed pretty well.”

So did you kayak as a family growing up?

“I grew up on the St. Joseph River and we always had kayaks at our house. My sister kayaked and she tried out for the Olympic trials in 1996. But my parents didn’t kayak recreationally, more just to stay in shape. We always did other sports, though, and my sister and I were always very active.”

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Tell me about Buchanan.

“It’s a small town about 90 miles east of Chicago. It was a great place to grow up. But San Diego is my new home. I have to be out here for the warmer weather and year-round training. The Center takes away all the other distractions and lets you focus on your objective, so it’s pretty nice.”

What’s your training schedule like?

“I paddle for close to two hours every morning and then I go for a 20-minute run to cool down. [Afterwards] I do a lot of stretching and sometimes I go to sports medicine to get ice for injuries. I have lunch and then usually take a nap. Then I lift weights for an hour and a half and then we paddle for another hour or so. In a big week we’ll paddle over 110 miles.”

Are injuries just a normal part of life for you?

“Kayakers don’t usually have too many serious injuries; they’re mainly simple over-use injuries.”

What has been particularly helpful to you in the process of training?

“The Olympic Job Opportunity Program at Home Depot has really helped. Home Depot employs people who are Olympic hopefuls. If you meet the right criteria they employ you part-time and pay you full-time salary with benefits and let you take months off here and there to train and compete in Europe. It’s a great opportunity; I really appreciate it.”

Have you already qualified for the Olympics?

“Yes. I went to Brazil for the continental qualifier and my K2 (two-man kayak) partner and I won. So we qualified in the K2 event.”

Can you describe the feeling of qualifying?

“It was a feeling of exhilaration. We were not in the lead the whole race. With about 300 meters left (it was a 1000-meter race) we passed the Argentinean team. As we crossed the line it was a great feeling; I’ll never forget it.”

What do you enjoy most about sprint kayaking?

“I like the intense training and the tough work load. I enjoy the long hours, the weight lifting and endurance work and just putting all my time and effort into it and seeing how much better I can get. And the racing, of course.”

Your parents must be thrilled about your upcoming participation in the Olympics.

“My parents are very excited. My mom is just ecstatic. She was a three-time Olympian; she actually won a bronze medal. She was the first woman to win a kayaking medal for the U.S. in 1964, in Tokyo, her first Olympics. “

Will your family be able to come to Athens to watch you compete?

“My mom and sister are coming over for sure; they’ve already got tickets. My dad is working on it.”

What is your message to athletes?

“To believe in yourself and do what you want to do. Don’t let anyone else tell you how far they think you can go.”

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Harvard Grad Hurdles
Brenda Taylor, 25, 400-meter Hurdle
Hometown: Boone, North Carolina

So you're a long way from home.

"Yea, I'm about as far away from home as I can get and still be in the same country."

Do you get homesick?

"I'm so focused right now on what I'm trying to accomplish that I don't have time to think about it much. And right now my twin sister is in San Diego visiting me."

How did you get into hurdling?

"I've been an athlete my whole life. I was a gymnast first and then a swimmer. I also played volleyball. In high school I ran cross-country and did track.

"Then one day my sister wanted to learn how to hurdle, and I went with her because I didn't have anything else to do that day. I ran relatively well that day, and at the end of the week I ran the Junior Olympic state meet in the 100-meter hurdle. I won the meet and made it to Nationals that summer. So it was more that hurdling found me than that I found it."

Does your twin sister still hurdle?

"She's doing the pole vault now."

Who has inspired you along the way?

"My parents have been my biggest cheerleaders from a young age. They always supported me by saying, "If you think you can do it, you can. You just have to figure out a way." I would tell them, "I want to win." And they would say, "What do you need to do to win?" I went to Harvard and my sister went to Brown, so it was the same academically.

"My coach in high school, Joel Williams, was a perfectionist and very bright. He was constantly learning and inspired me to be a student of my event. He taught me that I'm more empowered the more I know about my event. In life I feel that way; the more knowledge I have the more empowered I am.

"My current coach, Rahn Sheffield, is the head track coach at San Diego State University. He's an incredible human being. He's a brilliant track coach but he's also a brilliant motivator; he's one of those coaches who makes you a better person than you are, on the track and off. He expects greatness and he treats you that way, and so you really are constantly striving for more."

When did you move in to the Training Center?

"I've been living at the Center since October 2002. I'm in my 2nd season here."

What's your training schedule like?

"Well, I wake up and do a 30-minute bike ride, eat breakfast and go to the training room. [The training room is where athletes go for sports medicine; rehabilitation, ice baths and massage.] Then I go up to SDSU and I'm on the track for about three hours. And then it's back to Chula Vista and I lift weights for an hour and a half, go back to the training room and go to dinner. Then I get up and do it all again the next day.

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“A week ago I was competing in Seville, Spain and Ostrava in the Czech Republic. So there’s a lot of travel and a lot of training and fine-tuning at this point. I spend a lot of time in the training room.”

What’s your favorite aspect of doing the 400-meter hurdle?

“The 400-meter hurdle is known in the track world as being one of the toughest events on the track. The thing I really love about it is that at the end of the race everyone is exhausted; who crosses the finish-line first often comes down to a matter of mind, not a matter of body. I love that you’re constantly able to challenge yourself and transcend your own limits.”

How high are the hurdles?

“Thirty inches.”

When will you find out if you qualify for the Olympics?

“Track and Field trials are on July 2nd.”

What gives you a psychological boost during your training?

“One of my favorite quotes is Shakespeare, ‘Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt.’

“To me it means that right now I’m my biggest obstacle. I’m prepared to be successful on an Olympic level; it’s just a matter of whether or not I go out there and do it. Ten hurdles and my biggest barrier is between my ears.”

Do you have a message for athletes?

“Mainly it’s just to dare to dream. Never limit yourself; don’t be your own obstacle. Set your goals to something you really want to achieve and then figure out how to get there.”

No Goal Too High

Jamie Nieto, 27, High Jump

Hometown: Sacramento, California

What’s the story behind choosing the high jump?

“I first started out playing basketball. I didn’t start track and field until my junior year in high school. My friends told me they thought I should come out for track, but I really wasn’t interested because I thought it was all just running. I had some bad grades coming into basketball season my junior year so I wasn’t going to be able to do any sports that season. [My plan was] to get my grades up and come back next year.

“In between I wanted to work on my jumping ability for basketball and a friend suggested I should come out for track and do the high jump. So I said that I’d try it.

“I went out there and had fun my first season. I loved traveling with the team and hanging out with my friends, and the camaraderie between us. I ended up making it to the state meet my first year. I knew that [some of my team-mates] had been competing their whole lives and had never made it that far. So that told me I had some talent there.

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“At that point I told myself, ‘I think I’m going to go to the Olympics.’ I was 16. I kind of said it halfheartedly to myself, not knowing what it took to be an Olympian or to make the Olympic team. And as time went on I got more serious. I had a lot of fun with it. I ended up playing basketball my senior year and then going out for track and making it to the state meet again. I finished my senior year season with a jump of 6 feet 9 inches with no coach, so I thought that was pretty good.”

So how did you get from high school to competing at a world-class level?

“After high school I didn’t have enough money to go to Division-1 (highest competitive level) colleges and the D-1 colleges weren’t offering me scholarships because the best I had done was 6 feet 9 inches.

“So I ended up going to Sacramento City Junior College where I had heard they had a string of good seven feet high jumpers. I knew that would be the next step in getting to a D-1 college. So I got my AA degree. The first year I took second at the state meet with a jump of seven feet. Then the following year I tied for third. With those statistics I received a few offers and I narrowed it down to UC Berkeley and Eastern Michigan University.

“It was very exciting. It was in the plan so knew it could happen but I had never thought about how it could really happen. For some people it could be really hard to try to get a scholarship but [I had told myself], ‘I’m going to do this; I’m going to get this scholarship. I’m not going to worry about it. These are my plans.’ I just kept going along with it and believed and knew that it was going to happen.”

Which college did you choose?

“Eastern Michigan, because they wanted to give me the money at the present time; Berkeley wanted me to wait until fall semester, a few months away. I had student loans so I didn’t want to wait. And I figured it would be a better move for me because I’m from Sacramento and Berkeley’s not that far away so I might have been at home every weekend. Going to EM actually gave me that college experience.

“So I trained there; I was a three-time All-American, and broke the indoor and outdoor school record. To be an All-American you have to go to the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), the Division-1 meet with all the best high jumpers in the nation and place in the top eight. One year I actually got third, which is very good. I graduated school with my bachelor’s degree in business administration; my major was marketing.”

And after college?

“After school I just continued with track. In 1999 I jumped 7-6½ outdoors. I had my first experience abroad with the World University Games team; we traveled to Spain. My first taste of going overseas gave me the drive to have the life of a professional, elite athlete. I didn’t do very well [in the World University Games] but just to go there and be in that team setting was an awesome experience.”

Who has inspired you on your path with high jumping?

“In junior college I met a former jumper named Joe Rodan who started coaching me. He’s my mentor now. He was a jumper back in the ‘80s and was an alternate on the 1984 Olympic team in the high jump. He had competed abroad on the pro circuit. So he saw the spark in me, and fed the flame a bit, and helped it to become a fire.

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“I continued to learn and listen to him and started to train more, and things started coming together. And eventually I jumped seven feet. I stayed in contact with him when I went to Eastern Michigan; he still wrote my workouts while I was out there.”

What kind of training are you doing now?

“Right now I’m trying to keep my life really simple. I’m working; I have a job through the Home Depot Olympic Job Opportunities Program, which is a blessing. I think without that program I wouldn’t be able to do all this. I go to bed around 11:30 p.m. and wake up around 8:30 a.m., so I get some really good rest. I go to practice around 1 or 2 p.m. After practice on the track I lift weights and then I go to the training rooms and sit in an ice bath. After dinner I’m back in my room resting and just hanging out until 11:30 p.m.”

Are you focusing more on the jumping or the running right now?

“These days I’m focusing on running and getting fast. But you can’t focus on the running if you haven’t got the jumping down.”

What do you need to do now to qualify to compete in the Olympics?

“At this point I’ve hit the qualifying standard for the Olympics. Last year I was number one in the U.S. and number five in the world, so I’ve been training pretty hard and things have been going well.

“I have three more competitions before the trials, the Prefontaine in Oregon, then there’s a meet in Utah and another in Canada. Then I’ll take two weeks off and get ready for the trials. The Olympic trials are on July 15th and 18th in Sacramento, and all I have to do is place in the top three. I say that like it’s an easy task.”

Can you put into words the experience of doing the high jump and what you love about it?

“For every high jumper the first time they jump seven feet is awesome. It’s somewhat of a surreal experience. I’m pretty religious so I like to say I put it in God’s hands once I start moving and go to jump. So I don’t really know what’s going on until I’ve actually hit the pit.

“So when I hit the pit and clear the bar I’m thinking, ‘Yeah!’ I thank God. You can’t really think too much when you’re jumping and at this level it’s just a reaction; it’s more mental than physical.”

Would you like to give a message to other athletes?

“Your only limitations are what you believe. If you believe, you can achieve. If somebody tells me they’re going to jump nine feet sometime in their life, the record is only eight feet but I wouldn’t doubt them. I would say, ‘You keep on going. And good luck to you.’”

The messages offered by these driven individuals can be taken to heart not only by athletes, but by all of us in whatever goals we strive to attain. To those who’ve made Chula Vista their home as they persevere with epic endurance to their destination at Athens: we’re rooting for you!

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