

“Inside the Mind of an Achiever”

Interview of JAC Club Director, Eli Sunquist

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Q: I understand that you grew up in PA. Tell us what kind of influences (such as, family history, education, lifestyle, job experiences, etc.) in PA shaped your athletic and coaching careers? We are looking to hear how growing up in PA has influenced or motivated your career.

A: Yes, I spent my middle school and high school years in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This was many years after Pittsburgh was known as “Steel Country” but I really do think the Blue Collar attitude that made Pittsburgh such a thriving city years ago was still in most people’s attitudes. I always remember working hard at everything I did, even if I didn’t want to do it, because that is just what you did. Some of this was cultural (I didn’t grow up around many complainers and whiners, but rather others who worked hard towards a goal) but a lot of this was also how I was raised by my parents. They taught me from a young age that if you are going to do something, do it as well as you can, with the highest quality. You should always be proud of your work, so anything less than the best was a compromise, or “settling”. What I remember was that when we used to do chores around the house, we were rewarded for our work (an allowance, ability to borrow the car, etc) but the work was also inspected, to make sure that we did a good job. I never thought anything odd about this, because it always made sense to me that there was nothing wrong at all with hard work. Just half-ass or careless work was wrong. Finally, I grew up in a good Christian home, so another big influence for me was in believing that hard work was a good thing and it was expected from me. Such Bible verses as the ones below helped shaped my attitude:

“Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in forced labor.”

“All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty”

“Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies have no sense”

“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength”

Q: Were there any people from PA that inspired you? We are trying to see if there were any people in PA that influenced or motivated your high school, college and coaching career.

A: Other than my parents, I had one coach in high school that I really liked. She didn’t know much about the jumping events, but she cared about me, and tried to learn more about the jumps to help me. She also believed in me when I told her my goals, where my other coaches would laugh at me. She was the one track coach I had throughout my middle and high school years who I would have labeled a “good coach.” It was her belief in me, her admittance that she didn’t know much but was willing to learn, and her encouragement that really made me feel like I could improve. I wouldn’t say that she inspired me, but rather she was an example for me as to what a good coach looked like. Sadly right before my senior year of high school she took another job so I was only able to be coached by her for 1 year (my junior year of HS).

There were many coaches that I had, in different sports (during my high school career I at some point played basketball, soccer, football, golf, cross country, track, while also being in the marching band) that were great examples of terrible coaches. In an odd way, I had numerous tremendous examples of what a bad coach looked like. It does no good to bring up how bad they were / what they did, but I distinctively remember as a teenager longing for a coach who was good. Someone who was knowledgeable, caring, inspirational, and could bring out the best in me, without being someone I would resent. I don't think at all that this is what led me into coaching, but I do remember longing for a coach who could help me.

When I was jumping in high school, I would try to learn everything I could about the jumps. I would watch instructional videos, read books, articles, etc. One thing I did my junior and senior years of high school was drive (or have my parents drive me) to local college indoor meets to watch the college jumpers jump. Whether it was Pitt, Robert Morris, or Penn State, I would go to these indoor meets, sit in the stands, and watch. I would also film each jump from each jumper to go back and study later at home. One jumper I noticed at a few of the meets was a tall skinny white jumper from Slippery Rock University. He was very talented and did the same double-arm style that I did. He also would usually make the finals during these meets, and he was an intense competitor. I idolized him. He jumped over 47' as a white guy and I thought that was insanely good. At the time I was jumping 42', so I really was inspired by him and his abilities. I wanted to be like him. A collegiate triple jumper who would make the finals in track meets. And maybe one day I would be able to jump 47 feet!

Q; I understand that you lived abroad as well. What places did your family move to and how did that experience affect you? We are looking to hear how living abroad has influenced or motivated your choices and career.

A: Yes, I grew up on the island of Singapore, as my parents were missionaries. That experience was tremendous; as I grew up in a different culture, and was able to, at a young age, travel around the world. Our summer vacations took place in China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc. I had a totally different experience between the ages of 4-12 as most kids in the states. I am honestly not sure how my experience here in Singapore influenced my coaching or career, but I do know that I will always look back on my time in Singapore as some of the best years of my life. I was introduced to sports here in Singapore, but even when I was 12 and left for Pittsburgh I had no idea what track and field was, especially the field events. My sister ran a 400m race once at the local track, but other than that, I knew nothing about the sport as a 12 year old.

**As a side note, this is wild to me, as many kids ages 4-12 experience the start and end of their track careers because they are pushed into the competitive aspect of track and field at such a young age. I was starting my track and field career while some kids back in the states were finishing theirs.... I also remember a kid my first year in the states (7th grade) who was all about track and field. His name (one of the few names I remember from the 7th grade) was Gino Vaccaro. He would always wear "USATF" shirts to school, and any chance he got to do a report on something, it would be track and field / sprinting related. Book report? He went with a Jesse Owens biography. Science experiment? Did something about sprinting and wind and times. He always talked about track and the Junior Olympics. He was set on going to the Olympics. I think by the time he was a freshman in high school he had quit the sport and got into dance and fashion. He was my first real introduction to "burn out" and losing interest in something due to starting too early and being pushed too soon. Again, at the time I didn't think much about it, but I did notice it.

Q: What college did you attend? Talk about your time at Wake and what motivated or influenced you to make the choices you made. How did that experience influence your decision to attend Charlotte?

A: I attended Wake Forest University out of high school. All I knew as a high school junior and senior was that I really wanted to jump far in college, and that I had potential, just not the coach who could help me (yet). So, growing up in Singapore (tropical paradise) then moving to Pittsburgh (cold) I knew that I wanted to attend a college where it was warm. I also was very close to my family, so didn't want to move too far away. Finally, as a typical dumb high school student, I wanted to go somewhere where I could brag to my friends (and extended family) about where I went. I wanted to go to a Division 1 school, even though I was not Division 1 material. I wanted to go to a school in a big conference too. All of that being said, I wanted to go to an ACC school. I applied to Wake Forest, UNC-Chapel Hill, and Clemson. UNC-Chapel Hill denied me, I loved Clemson, but the coach at Wake was very nice to talk to over the phone. He was a great guy, took time to review the film I sent him, and told me that even though I didn't have the grades and test scores to get into Wake, that if I wanted to go there, he believed in me enough to give me a "spot" that the team had to let in athletes they wanted who might not get admitted. I jumped at that opportunity, and said yes. This was in February of my senior year.

I would communicate with the Wake coach consistently, telling him about my senior year, how I was jumping, etc. Again, here I was, a kid who couldn't get into Wake on my academics and had no business being a division 1 ACC triple jumper, and this coach not only believed in me, but he also kept talking to me, encouraging me, and that just blew me away. College was going to be great! I was going to have a good, knowledgeable, caring coach. I was going to jump far!!

May of my senior year I got a voicemail from one of my future teammates, a javelin thrower at Wake, letting me know that my future coach got let go. He was no longer at Wake Forest.... I was heart broken. I tried to contact him, but his phone number stopped working, and my emails got bounced back. My parents were great enough that they even told me I could take the year off, and try to find a place for the following year to go to. It was a tough decision for me, but decided to go to Wake Forest anyway, and see who they would hire as the replacement coach.

My first semester academically and socially was amazing at Wake Forest. I killed it in the classroom and made a lot of great friends. I was religious about being the best athlete I could be off the track as well. I was in bed every night by 10pm, stretched for 30 min every night before bed, and did everything perfectly that you should do. No drinking, no sodas, no parties, just rest, relaxation, time with friends, and school work. It was truly awesome. When I started getting some shin pain I went to Wal-Mart and bought a kiddie pool for the room. We had an ice machine in the dorm, so each night I was able to have an ice bath in my room without having to go anywhere. Again, the perfect set up for an athlete hungry to be the best.

On the track however was a different story. The coach they hired knew nothing about the jumps. The first thing he ever said to me when I met him was, "You do the triple jump? I hate the triple jump, it's always the last event at a track meet, I always have to stay late at meets because of the triple jump." Talk about a 180 from the guy he replaced!

That fall semester was outright depressing on the track. I came back after many practices and cried in my dorm room. The training was terrible, the coaches didn't care about the athletes, and none of the

jumpers were happy. At the beginning of that season we had about 10 jumpers. By the end of the season only 2 stayed on, the rest either quit or transferred.

I also remember telling my new “coach” that my goal was to break the Wake Forest school record in the triple jump. It was 49’1”. He laughed at me.

I did what I said I was going to do, I tried it out, practiced with the new coach, but it was just terrible. Apparently Wake Forest is a good school academically, but I wasn’t in love with the school enough to stay. I had decided I was going to transfer, so during the Christmas break after my 1st semester I tracked down the coach who recruited me at Wake Forest, went to his house, and over pizza I asked him what I should do. I told him the only thing I cared about was jumping further. That was it. School, climate, division no longer mattered. Just the coach. So he gave me three names of coaches he said were great for the jumps. One was at Indiana University, one was at Purdue, and one was at UNC-Charlotte. 2 big name schools and 1 school I had never heard of, even though it was an hour away from where I was sitting.

That Christmas break I rented a car and visited all 3 schools on my own. I loved my time at Indiana University and meeting with their coach. Purdue was just ok. Charlotte was a great visit as well, and the coach was very nice and intelligent. I was very torn between IU and Charlotte, both schools and coaches were great. When I really thought about it though, Charlotte was in a much warmer climate and it was closer to the friends I made at Wake. I decided on transferring to Charlotte for those reasons.

Side note: I was still a terrible athlete, so any school I chose would not come with any type of athletic scholarship. Our family didn’t have the money for these schools out of state, but my parents told me if this was really important to me, they would let me go, but I would have to take out student loans to pay for my school. They were supportive of my dreams when no one else was, that was very special and important to me.

When I got back from Christmas break and told the coaches that was unhappy and was thinking of transferring they immediately kicked me off the team and told me I couldn’t use the track or weight room anymore. So I had to get creative....

That spring semester I trained on my own at night at a local high school, lifted weights at the school rec center, and started doing pool workouts in the indoor pool at Wake Forest. Usually I would be in the shallow end bounding and doing sprint drills, while professors and elderly people were swimming laps. Again, I knew I wanted to get better, so put in the work wherever and whenever I could.

Q: Did you experience any kind of anxiety transferring to Charlotte and if so, what led to that anxiety? Any insight that you may have concerning the move from Wake to Charlotte would be key. Why it was good for you and why you were excited about it.

A: No, I had no type of anxiety in transferring. Yes I would be starting over again, but I was very excited about the opportunity to be coached by a good coach. Something I had been wanting since I was in the 7th grade. I was so excited that I asked the coach at Charlotte if I could move down the summer before the fall semester to train with him. He said yes, but that I had to find my own place to live, and I had to find a job to support myself. I finished my semester at Wake Forest, spent 10 days in Senegal, West Africa on a mission trip, and flew straight to Charlotte from there. I moved to an unknown place with no job, to train with someone I had just met, all because I wanted to be the best I could be. I ended up renting a room from a family that I had never met, got a job at Arby’s, and trained 6 days a week. My

days that summer consisted of work at Arby's from 9-3, practice from 4-6, and then bed by 10 to do it all again. It was during this summer that I had the biggest improvement in my jumping.

The other guys that were training with me that summer were all post-collegiate jumpers. A guy who had jumped over 26' in the long jump AND 50' in the triple jump AND 7'3" in the high jump. Another guy who had jumped over 26' in the long jump and over 54' in the triple jump. Also in that group were 2 other guys who had jumped over 50' in the triple jump. My PR at the time was 21'2" in the long jump and 44'4" in the triple jump.

I distinctively remember each practice them making fun of me, and teasing me, but in a loving way, much like older brothers. All of them had been all-Americans and had jumped with some of the best in the country. They taught me a lot that summer, about how to compete, what it took to be at that level, and they helped me (in an odd sort of way) find my place at Charlotte and fit in. My best friends that summer were 4 post-collegiate jumpers who were all 6-8 years older than me.

Q: What can you tell us about your time at Charlotte? Speak about your experience as a walk-on and what it took to make it to nationals.

A: My time at Charlotte was absolutely tremendous. My coach was my idol and mentor. He, like me, was a walk-on when he was in college, and he was able to improve dramatically during his college career. He always told me that if he could do it, I could do it, BUT I had to work extremely hard and stay focused in on my goals. He 100% believed in me, and definitely pushed me to be the best athlete that I could be. My first year at Charlotte my personal best improved by 5 feet in the triple jump. By the end of my freshman year at Charlotte I had jumped over 49' in the triple jump, and somehow was able to have jumped at the Mt. Sac Relays in California, the Texas Relays and the Florida Relays, all in the same year. I was also fortunate enough to qualify for the NCAA First round meet, one of the few freshmen to do so.

The main philosophy I had throughout my entire college career, especially my first year at Charlotte, was that I had nothing to lose. I was not a good jumper, but I had the drive to be the best, so whatever my coach told me to do, I did it. I fully trusted him, and would run through a wall for him. So when he told me that really learning the Olympic lifts would help with my jumps, I did it. When he said I needed to fall in love with lifting weights, I did. My 2nd year at Charlotte I won the "dedicated award" from the strength and conditioning staff. I was getting to be known from all of the athletes and coaches from other sports as the "hard worker". None of this is to brag, but rather say that I knew what I wanted, had a great coach to guide me, but it was up to me to do the work and make the sacrifices that I needed to accomplish them. I still didn't have any alcohol, no soda, no parties, no late nights, but had a phenomenal college experience. I was able to travel around the United States, compete at some of the best track meets in the country, all for free. How cool is that?

Q: Since you weren't the "typical" triple jumper, what kind of adverse conditions did you have to deal with? Briefly speak on the challenges you faced while triple jumping at the Division I level.

A: At first I wasn't the "typical" triple jumper, but because I studied so much film and had such a great coach, I was able to jump really far because I had very good jumping technique. This came from years of practice. Again, since I felt like I had nothing to lose, and felt like I had a chip on my shoulder from all of my bad experiences, I was just happy to be there and prove people wrong. It was so a tremendous

feeling to go to a meet and beat all of the jumpers from Clemson, Wake Forest and UNC. It was great shaking the “jumps” coach’s hand at Wake Forest and telling him that I jumped farther than their school record. It was also a great feeling going to meets to check in to the triple jump and having officials doubt that I was a triple jumper because of my size and skin color. All of these things were really cool.

One thing I would like to mention is that I also had a ton of frustrations at Charlotte. Going to a meet and not jumping far. Going to a meet and fouling big jumps. Going to a meet and fouling out. None of these were fun experiences. But I will say that I had a very good attitude about all of that. My mind-set was very “short term memory” like. If I had a bad meet I would be frustrated for a few minutes, but then immediately thought about how to make things better the next time around. I was always looking to do better. If I had a great meet I was happy but not satisfied. If I had a bad meet I was already looking forward to the next one, ready to do better and redeem myself. I never pouted or felt sorry for myself or got down on myself. I was used to failure from my high school days and time at Wake Forest. So failure wasn’t a bad thing, just an opportunity for me to do better the next time. I was for sure called an optimist and a dreamer, but I really feel like my attitude helped me become so resilient and didn’t let me get caught up on the bad things. A lot of athletes are like Eeyore, feeling sad and down on themselves when they have a bad performance, but I was like Tigger, always excited for the next opportunity.

Q: Was it your time at Charlotte that inspired you to coach? Speak about your time after graduation and what you had to do to continue training. Speak about the sacrifices. Speak about getting the coaching bug.

A: Yes, it was my time at Charlotte that led me into coaching. I went from having bad coach after bad coach for years, and then I found a great one. I realized the positive impact that he had on my athletic and social life, and wanted to be that for others. I would spend hours in his office before and after practice asking him all sorts of questions on training, coaching, etc, and he was patient enough to help mentor me even when I was a collegiate athlete.

My main goal in the triple jump was to jump over 50’. I was very close in college, but missed it by a few inches. Since I wanted to be a college coach after graduation, I decided to stay at Charlotte, attend graduate school, keep training and learning from my college coach. Again, in order to do all of this, I needed to find a job to support myself. I found a job at a local coffee shop as well as at the academic center at Charlotte. So for those two years post collegiately I worked from 5am-10am at the coffee shop, went to a few classes, practiced in the afternoon, did some coaching, and then worked in the academic center at night. They were long days, but they helped me support myself and my dreams. My goal was still to be the best I could, specifically jumping over 50’, so everything else in my life was set up around that goal. It was like that was the bullseye on the dart board, and everything was set up around that to help with that goal. If there was something that would get in the way of that goal, I just didn’t do it. To me it was pretty simple.

Q: Wow! What did you have to do to jump 50 feet? Speak about setting goals for yourself.

A: Not to sound too dumb, but I just kept working hard and trusting my coach. I think I should have jumped that far before I actually did, but when I finally did jump over 50’ I wasn’t that surprised. I had worked so hard for it, my thought was, “Its about time!”

Q: Coaches are a dime a dozen. What made you think that you could become a great coach? Speak about your motivations and give insight into the mind of a self-motivated individual.

A: I was extremely fortunate to have a great example of a great coach (my Charlotte coach) as well as A LOT of examples of bad coaches. When I decided to get into coaching full time, my attitude was exactly the same as mine as an athlete. I went from wanting to be the best triple jumper that I could, to wanting to be the best track coach that I could. I dove in head first to learning how to be a great coach. I knew that I needed the knowledge first, then the experience. I asked my coach what I needed to do to be a great coach. He told me that I needed to find some mentors to ask lots of questions to, I needed to attend coaching education classes, and I need to just start coaching.

I did all of that, and then some. I would spend hours in the library at night photocopying track and field magazines, books, and articles. I would cold call and email all of the best coaches asking them questions. I attended every clinic and class I could. All of which I used my own money for. I knew what I wanted to do, so just went for it. I didn't make excuses, I didn't worry how dumb I sounded when asking questions to world- class coaches, and I didn't every think about failing as a coach. I just wanted to learn as much as I could, and one day be a coach like my college coach was. Again, I felt like if I was going to be a coach, I needed to work really hard at being the best coach that I could. I wouldn't feel comfortable half-assing something. There were a few events I didn't know that well when I started coaching at the collegiate level (pole vault and throws). So I decided to learn as much as I could about those events, so that I could be an expert. I saw that as a challenge, and loved the challenge of learning as much as I could about those events. I remember doing discus turns and shot put drills in the kitchen of my small apartment to get the movements right.

Looking back, as an athlete and as a coach, I saw all "obstacles" as opportunities to overcome something. Not at all as an obstacle. I think it was my mentality and attitude that set me apart from a lot of athletes and coaches.

Q: You have had some bright moments with your athletes. Tell us a little about some of your athletes and their accomplishments. Let me have it! From David Bell to Laine, Brittney and Tyrone to Allen Simms and Nicole Greene. Light it up.

A: This question could be a project as itself! I can go more in depth if you need me to, but pretty much, all of these athletes that you mentioned had tremendous results and improvements. And I think all of them have 1 thing in common.....They consistently practiced, they were positive people, they trusted their coach and the "process" and they made some sacrifices along the way. Yes, they all were great athletes, but more so, they all had the internal drive to keep working hard and staying positive no matter what had happened. It is interesting that you picked those athletes, as all of them simply worked hard, came to practice religiously, and made sacrifices to be the best that they could be. It is not surprising to me that they were some of the best athletes I have coached.

Q: What do you see for the future and the Jacksonville Athletic Club? Draw on your motivation to make this club the place for elite athletes to train.

A: I see the future of this club as it being a beacon or lighthouse if you will, for track and field athletes and coaches of all ages. Because I had such a terrible high school experience, my heart will for sure be there for the high school aged kids first and foremost. I would love to provide them with a much better experience than I had. That is why I started this club.

I would love to see the club grow, have a large group of youth athletes (ages 5-10) who can in a fun way learn the sport, but not feel too much pressure to compete and get burnt out (like my friend Gino....)

I would love to have a large group of high school athletes who are very serious about getting better, and who are willing to trust a coach 100%. This might mean some of them wanting to do track year round, and I am ok with that. I just would really like a group of athletes who are 100% bought in and do what the need to do to reach the next level

It would be neat to have a group of post-collegiate athletes as well, and also master's athletes.

I would also like to have our club be a place where high school coaches can come and learn from our coaches. An open environment where coaches who want to be mentored or learn different events can come and learn.

Finally, I do think that it is important for our club to provide lots of opportunities to athletes and coaches alike. So we will still continue to host track meets, special events, as well as coaching clinics to help the track and field community.