

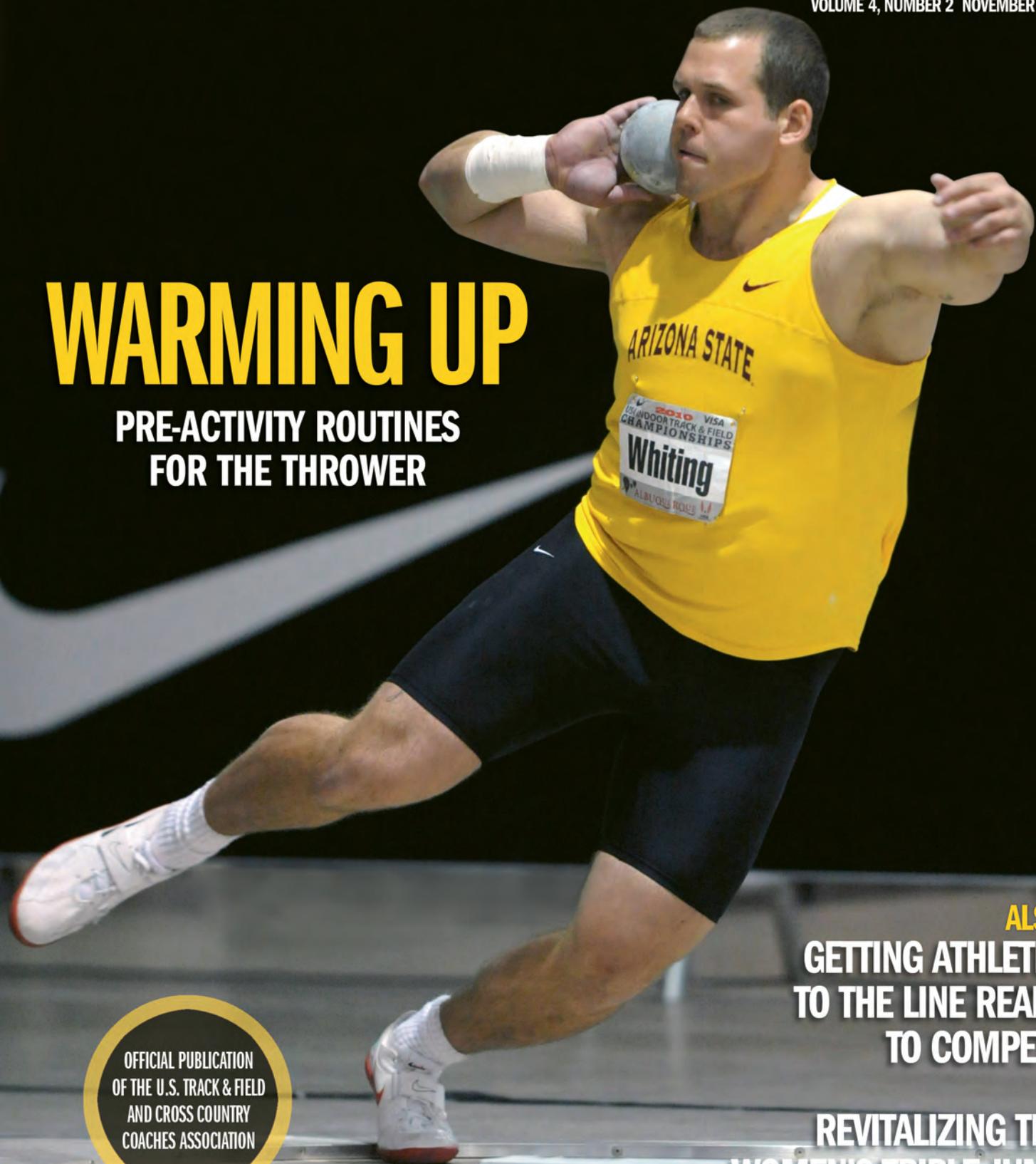
# techniques

for Track & Field and Cross Country

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 2 NOVEMBER 2010

## WARMING UP

PRE-ACTIVITY ROUTINES  
FOR THE THROWER



**ALSO:**  
GETTING ATHLETES  
TO THE LINE READY  
TO COMPETE

REVITALIZING THE  
WOMEN'S TRIPLE JUMP

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION  
OF THE U.S. TRACK & FIELD  
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COACHES ASSOCIATION

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# THE COMPLEXITY OF THE TRIPLE JUMP

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**FEW WOMEN COMMIT TO THE TRIPLE JUMP.  
HOW CAN WE CHANGE THIS?**

By Eli Sunquist

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**T**he triple jump is one of the few field events in which Americans have not excelled for years...Ganslen attributes the lack of progress in the triple jump since the 1930's to two major aspects: 1.) the tendency of jumpers and coaches to underestimate the difficulty of executing the event as a skill; 2.) the lack of appreciation of the importance of the strenuous training programs necessary to prepare the athlete for this event.

*- Triple Jump Encyclopedia, 1977*

## **THE PROBLEM**

The triple jump is a complex event that takes years to master. As of yet, very few American women have taken a full-time commitment to the mastery of the triple jump. Because of this, their showing on the world stage has been almost non-existent. There is so much potential in this country for the triple jump and it is quite discouraging to see, year after year, our women left out of the biggest meets of the year. How bad is it? See for yourself:

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TABLE 1:

EVENT	TOP 25 PERFORMANCES BY AN AMERICAN	NOTES
Men's TJ	Yes	6 in the top 20
Women's TJ	No	highest ranking, 876
Men's LJ	Yes	9 of the top 10
Women's LJ	Yes	6 in the top 25
Men's HJ	Yes	3 in top 25
Women's HJ	Yes	1 in top 25
Men's PV	Yes	5 in top 25
Women's PV	Yes	4 in top 25

As you can see, in all jumping events U.S. men and women rank higher than 25th all-time, except for the women's triple jump. The all-time best triple jump for a US woman (Hurd's 14.45 AR) ranks 876 on the world list. This is the lowest number of any event, by an American male or female, in the history of the sport. The problem is clear; the disparity is baffling. Many coaches know that the women's triple jump in the U.S. has given a poor showing, but most coaches do not know just how poorly we have done.

**WHAT CAN WE DO?**

My purpose here is not to place blame, but to present the facts so we see the poor state of this event on the world stage and try and look forward to see what can be done to change our global standing in the women's triple jump. If we coaches can start a dialogue about this, it may begin a reversal of this terrible U.S. showing for women's track. What I want to focus in on in this article is what we are doing at the collegiate and post-collegiate levels to help our female triple jumpers. The U.S. women are competitive at the world stage at the youth and junior levels, but then their performance drops of tremendously. I want to focus on why that is and what we can do to change it.

**FAST FOOD COLLEGIATE SYSTEM**

When I was in Europe watching our jumpers getting consistently out-jumped, I started thinking that we Americans are always looking for fast results. We want "instant gratification" and this carries over into many of our cultural attitudes, including sports. We want to be the best, and we want it now. When we look at training methods at the college level, I believe that too many coaches are looking to train the characteristics, or traits that can be easily charted, or mapped out, rather than those characteristics that may not be quantifiable. This could be due to a few factors, but I think the main reasons are either because a lack of knowledge of the event, or because of an "instant gratification" mindset. For instance, we can easily tell if someone is getting stronger, because he or she will be able to lift more weights. You can tell if runners are faster based on their times. However, you can't really track technical improvement (improvement of your jumping technique) and frankly, it isn't as much fun. In fact, it can be quite frustrating because you don't immediately see hard, factual results. These technical changes will ben-

efit the athlete for the greatest improvement in the long term.

It seems that we in the college system are training our female triple jumpers to be fast and strong (again, not bad characteristics to have at all if you are an athlete), but we are not training them to be triple jumpers. We are taking care of, and doing those things that make both the athlete and coach feel good (example: making our athletes stronger and faster), but that really is not training a triple jumper to be a triple jumper. One of my favorite quotes is "It is relatively easy to bring an athlete to a point

where he can squat with 150-175 kilograms, but it is far more difficult to train an athlete to jump 16 meters." (Heinz Rieger) It is a Zen- like way of reminding coaches of the general ease of training someone to increase her strength, but the difficulty in event-specific training technique.

Finally, as U.S. collegiate coaches, we neglect to teach technical fundamentals, techniques and drills that help to teach, for they take too long to see results, and in the fast-paced, long, competitive collegiate system we are forced to obtain instant results. This can be detrimental to our women, who need time to mature and learn the important techniques. The triple jump is one of the most technical events in the sport of track & field. The more coaches at all levels understand this, and teach sound technique first, with the long-term plan in mind, the better off we will be in the development of these jumpers.

Because it is an unusual and unnatural event, it must be taught and the body needs to become accustomed to performing the task (whatever it may be) for an extended period of time. It takes years to master the triple jump. This is made evident by the fact that current world-record holders for both men and women set their standards over the age of 28, which would correspond to about 5-6 years out of college. Not only that, but both Shelia Hudson and Tiombe Hurd were older than 29 when they broke the American Record! The technique for such an unnatural event takes years and years to master.

One recent statistic that is a good indicator of this is the class make-up of the 2010 NCAA Outdoor women's triple jump championship field. There were only three underclassmen in the meet for the triple jump, which was the lowest number of underclassmen for any women's event by far! The closest events to having those few underclassmen were the heptathlon and hammer throw, both of which had seven underclassmen (and both of which would be considered events that take time to master). That means that the women's triple jump had the lowest number of underclassmen by more than double that of the next closest event! To underscore the long-term orientation of this event, half of the field was made up of seniors. Twelve of the 24 jumpers were in their fourth or fifth year of college, which again shows that the triple jump (especially for women) is an event that takes time to master. In a positive light, this shows that with a good coach and long-term focus, great things can be accomplished.

## POST COLLEGIATE

Furthermore, if we were able to have a female compete successfully at a very high level in college, the future would look very bleak for her once she got out of school. In the U.S. although we are quite successful in the sport, there is little funding at all for track & field athletes who want to pursue their talents and abilities after college. If it takes around 10 years to become a world-class triple jumper, an individual needs time after college to continue to train and perfect her talent. However, in the United States, this is very unrealistic, due to the lack of resources and funding by the USATF and USOC. Unless our athletes are No. 1 or 2 in their event, an aspiring athlete would take a huge financial hit to become a full-time athlete.

With the societal pressures to get a job, make money and settle down, it is very hard for an aspiring female jumper to put her life on hold to follow a dream, especially if she lacks the proper coaches and funding. At my last school we had two (multiple time All-Americans) female jumpers pass through our program over the past few years, only to quit jumping after they graduated, solely because they lacked the financial and social support. Instead of following their dreams, and working toward improvement, they are both now working 9-to-5 jobs, and “getting on with their lives.” The only two current female American triple jumpers who have been somewhat successful on the world stage recently are both in their 30s, and have both bounced back and forth from Europe and the U.S. trying to make it work. One could only wonder how good they would be if they had the support of their own country.

**If we coaches can start a dialogue about this, it may begin a reversal of this terrible US showing for women’s track**

But don’t just take it from me! In an audio interview a few years ago, Dan Pfaff was asked about the current U.S. system for elite athletes, and this is what he had to say (It’s no surprise to me that he is no longer coaching here in the U.S.):

“...Where we fall down is as soon as they are finished with their University, or if they are not academically inclined to go to University, the road stops. We basically throw these guys on the street after their university careers are over and, I mean, it’s amazing to me. I probably get over 50 emails a year from U.S. athletes who were world class level in University and now they can’t even find a place to train, a coach to coach them; they don’t have a shoe contract, and

these are all kids that, with another year or two in the sport under great conditions and a good coach would be podium type kids! But that’s where we fail them in our country... [the post-collegiate system is] an embarrassment. If you are incredibly gifted, and you get one of the golden coaches then you make it and if not it’s a tough road. I currently coach six kids that are top 25 in the world, and these guys are working jobs and living in sub-standard housing and begging for medical care and nutritionally up to chance. It’s incredible.”

Here we can see how the lack of financial and coaching support for these athlete makes it so much more difficult for them to fully train and improve. If the key to success for our women’s triple jumpers lies in long-term development, financial and coaching support are two big hurdles to jump over. Even if a jumper had a great college career, she would still need to compete and train once when she graduate from school, since the event takes years and years to master. The current system (or lack thereof) for long-term development for elite athletes only serves to discourage athletes from continuing on their athletic careers because there are so many road blocks in the way.

## HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

If we are interested in improving the women’s triple jump situation, I think a brief look to the future is important. Is there hope for an American woman to make it big in the world stage in the triple jump? I would argue yes, but it would take much sacrifice. It might mean moving to live closer to a good coach, or not getting a full-time job right out of school so that she could have time to train, or not starting a family having kids for a few years, etc. All of these sacrifices are necessary in order to continue in the sport at a high level. It is not a fun thing to do at times, but I firmly believe if someone is focused and dedicated to being the best at something, a little sacrifice in the present will be worth it in the future.

One of the ways to help elicit growth and improvement is through corporately sponsored track “teams” or training centers that allow and encourage elite athletes to train together and, at the same time, learn from each other. Not only would it provide athletes an environment in which to train, but also, more importantly, it would put them with knowledgeable coaches who would help them.

There are a few clubs around the country that take this sort of commitment seriously. It is a fantastic idea and something that would greatly benefit female triple jumpers who want to continue to train and compete once they graduate. They fit the model of needing the basic resources for post-collegiate training centers, and helping with training, lodging, jobs and even travel. This is definitely a good start, but it is just a start. I am looking forward to seeing more of these training centers opening up, providing elite athletes and elite hopefuls with opportunities to train and compete at a higher level. This could only help the development of our women triple jumpers.



### HISTORY AS A WHEEL: THE MEN DID IT!

Finally, I would like to share a history lesson. It doesn't happen often, but sometimes history repeats itself. In 1977 a book was published called *The Triple Jump Encyclopedia*. This book was a "holy grail" of sorts to both coaches and athletes alike who wanted to learn more about training and technique for this complex field event, as well as find out what athletes in other countries were doing to further their development. This encyclopedia, which was more than 300 pages, explored every aspect of the event, including technique training, weight lifting, drills, training plans from successful athletes, diet and even better ways to watch high-speed film. Although this book was written and compiled by two American coaches, the majority of the book's resources came from outside of the U.S.; mainly training advice from Eastern Europe, Japan, Brazil, and Great Britain. The reason so much of the book came from "outside sources" was because the U.S. men struggled a bit in this event on the world stage. The Russians, Cubans, Brazilians, and Poles were consistently beating the Americans at the technical event, and the book was written to try and find out how the men could improve. Sound familiar?

Below are some selected pieces of the first chapter in this encyclopedia:

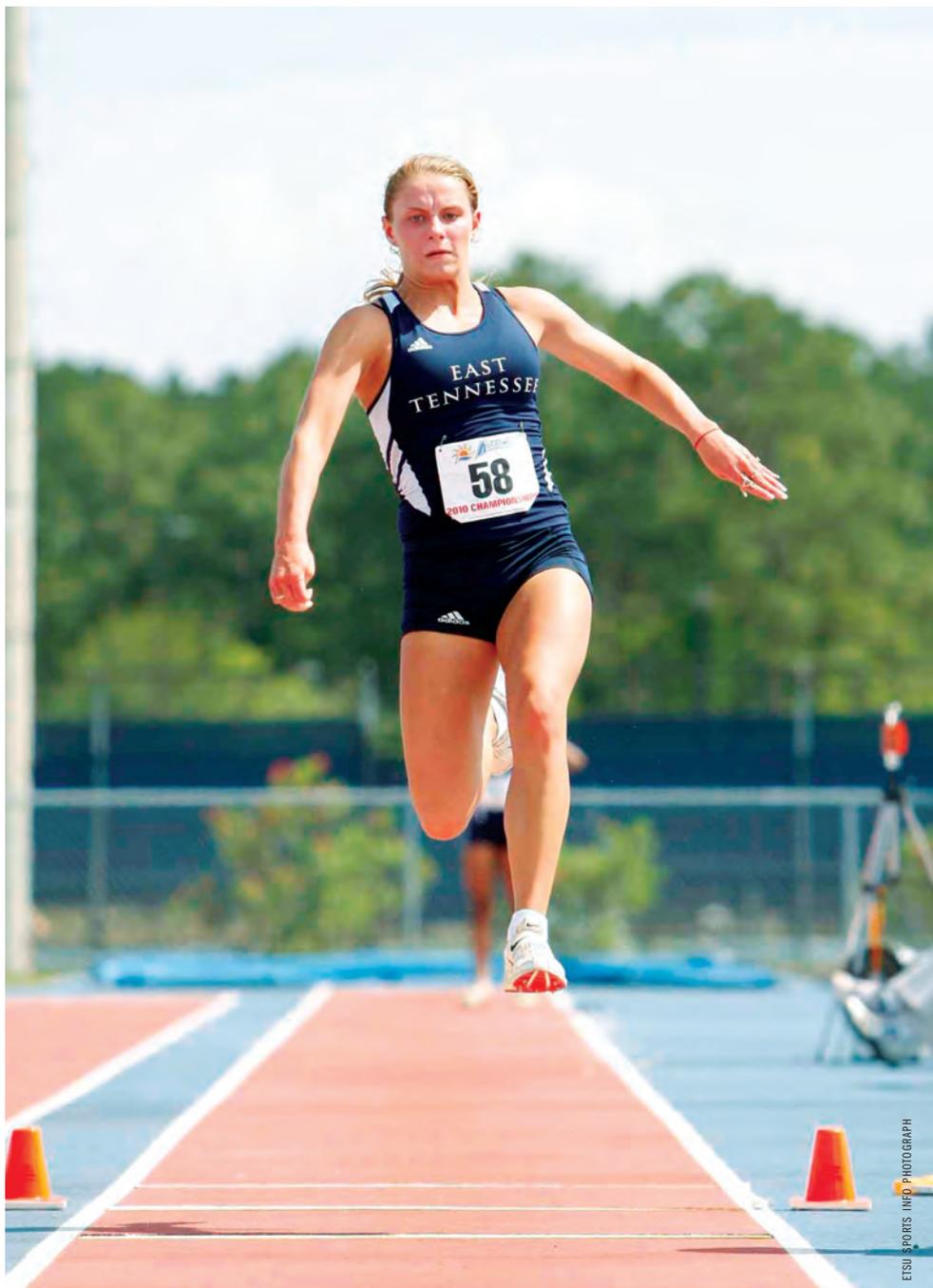
*The triple jump is one of the few field events in which American have not excelled for years...Ganslen attributes the lack of progress in the triple jump since the 1930s to two major aspects: 1) the tendency of jumpers and coaches to underestimate the difficulty of executing the event as a skill; 2) lack of appreciation of the importance of the strenuous training programs necessary to prepare the athlete for this event.*

*With increased participation today in the U.S. school system, perhaps our jumpers will move up to the level of competence that our other field performers enjoy at the international level. However, America's training techniques and coaching emphasis must improve in the triple jump if we hope to compete on an even level with the rest of the world.*

*This text is an expression of the authors' interest and enthusiasm*

*in filling the growing need for knowledge and guidance in the event, especially for high school athletes. The triple jump need no longer be an 'orphan' event in the American track and field picture. (Bullard and Knuth, pages 17-18)*

The reason I included these excerpts is two-fold. First, I thought it was interesting how the U.S. men were faced with a similar situation a little more than 30 years ago. They, like the current U.S. women, were at the bottom of the barrel and were seeking answers to as to why this was the case. The text provided many possible solutions, as well as great resources to help promote change. The second reason I bring up these quotes is to show the continued focus on not just technical secrets, but also the importance of people (coaches, educators, etc.) to learn the complex event and understand that development takes time.



ETSU SPORTS INFO PHOTOGRAPH

It is clear that the two must go hand-in-hand. Understanding how complex and technical the event is leads us to the conclusion that success in the triple jump (both for men and women) take years of hard work.

I brought up the history of the men's problem to show that change is possible. The U.S. men do extremely well on the

## America's training techniques and coaching emphasis must improve in the triple jump if we hope to compete on an even level with the rest of the world.

world stage now in the triple jump. In 2005 and 2006 we had the World Champion in the event, and for the past 10 years we have had at least one male ranked in the top 15 in the world. What is not surprising to me is that these American male triple jumpers who are at the top of the world rankings are at least 3 years out of college. They "got it." They, (and their coaches, ) understood the importance of long term development, sacrifice, hard work, and the idea of mastery taking time. In the last Olympic year, the top five American male triple jumpers had the average age of 28 years old! Simple math shows that this is at least four to five years of triple jumping after college. It wasn't glamorous for them, working part-time. I'll never forget hearing about Walter Davis working in the gardening section of Home Depot, or seeing Allen Simms designing kitchen cabinets in Lowes. But it was well worth it.

### FINAL CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I hope this article has served as a guide to coaches like myself. I do not have the ability or knowledge yet to say exactly why our female triple jumpers are so far behind, but I hope that this paper has motivated others to ask the same types of questions that I have been asking, so that together we can bring about improvement. I think that the college system, with its high demands on frequent meets does not give female athletes enough time to learn (or relearn) the proper technique of such a demanding event. It may also be that the coaching education system needs to be modified, so that more coaches become knowledgeable in the triple jump, especially in the long term training methods for female jumpers. Finally, I must stress the importance of post-collegiate training for these women. We need to find a place for them to train with good coaches so that we can begin to change the state of an event that has suffered for so long. It will take sacrifice, it will take dedication, and it will take perseverance. But then again, what great accomplishments don't?

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