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Emily Hunsucker winds up and prepares to launch the hammer.

Photo Courtesy: Chip Bromfield, ProMotion Ltd.



Brooks: Hunsucker Hammers On With Great Success

Release: 04/25/2013 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

BOULDER – Emily Hunsucker's first encounter with the hammer – not the variety found on her father's tool bench – was highly memorable but less than inspiring.

"The first time I picked it up I fell backwards," she recalled the other day with a laugh. "But that's OK."

It's OK because of the countless hours Hunsucker has put in to succeed. She's moved so far beyond OK that Casey Malone, her throwing coach for the University of Colorado's track and field team, sometimes has difficulty believing what he sees when Hunsucker begins that oddly graceful but peculiar windup with a 4 kilo steel ball attached to a length of cable and lets it fly.

It's not easy. In fact, Malone, a two-time Olympian throwing the discus, calls the hammer throw "potentially the most demanding track and field event there is. You're trying to throw a very heavy implement a long ways."

But Hunsucker, introduced to the event only four years ago as a CU freshman, has made it work because of her dedication to do it right. "It's all encompassing," Malone said of his protege's commitment.. "It's so far above and beyond pretty much what anybody has ever put in here."

At last weekend's prestigious Mt. SAC Relays in Walnut, Calif., Hunsucker obliterated her own previous CU

record, throwing the hammer 200 feet, three inches (61.03 meters). It was the first 200-plus foot throw by a CU female student-athlete, breaking her former mark of 197-8 set on March 30 by nearly 2½ feet.

Malone marveled at Hunsucker's feat because of her relative inexperience in the event. At Pomona High School, Hunsucker was accomplished in the shot put – she won the state championship as a senior – but never gave the hammer a second thought. Her older brother, Hayden, was an offensive lineman at Pomona and his O-line coach also handled the track team's throwers.

Hayden brought Emily to the weight room, the coach commented she was “kind of small but pretty strong” and Emily transitioned from volleyball to track. She called throwing “fun . . . I was good at it and it wasn't at all typical. I mean, how do you even get into throwing? That's a common question. It's kind of by chance, I guess.”

Emily toyed with the idea of attending Colorado State and had another couple of schools show interest in her. But her decision to attend CU came down to Malone, his interest and belief in her “when nobody else was recruiting me,” she said. “I might have wanted to go to another school, but Casey said he wanted me to come here. He was the only coach who really believed in me at the time. I hadn't won the state (shot) championship then, you know? He saw my transformation.”

At CU, Malone introduced her to the hammer and she took to it like a Kardashian to a camera. But there was work to be done – much work. Throwing the hammer, said Malone, is “so technically demanding and such a foreign movement. You have to basically learn from scratch and it works counter intuitively to what you think it would be. It takes thousands and thousands of reps of throwing this heavy implement.

“Most athletes usually have been throwing it for 10 or 15 years before they become world class. If you're in Russia or Hungary, you're throwing at age 10 or 12, so she's playing catch up. If you start as an American, you might run out of time before you reach your athletic peak. It would be like if we (CU) brought in a sprinter who had never walked before – it's that big of a challenge.”

For Hunsucker, there's a physical challenge as well. When you picture female hammer throwers, you probably see a big picture – as in *really* big. Back in the day, Communist Bloc big: Picture Olga, Helga, Irina. In her sport, Emily of Arvada is on the small side. A well-toned 5-6, she's hardly petite but neither is she of the body type her competitors or judges might expect to step into the thrower's circle.

On the flight last weekend to California, Hunsucker was seated next to men's throwing teammate Cameron Hutchins, who is 6-6. A fellow passenger leaned over the seat, addressed Hutchins and remarked, “You must be a thrower,” recalled Hunsucker.

“Then she asked me what I did and I said, ‘I'm a thrower, too.’ She said, ‘Oh . . . you're kind of small; you must be tough.’”

Hunsucker hears that a lot, but her recent performances have pushed her past the point of taking offense and to a spot among her sport's regional/national leaders. “That's fine, it's kind of cool that people underestimate me,” she said. “But it's such a technical thing and that's the equalizer. You might be small, but you might be really fast or strong enough. You just have the right feel for it. There are girls who are so much bigger than me; I don't know why I'm good at it. I guess technique has a lot to do with it.”

More than you would ever guess. Height is golden, leverage reigns in the hammer throw – but never underestimate technique. “Taller athletes have the advantage of leverage,” Malone said. “They can create a bigger radius with the hammer, which creates more potential of speed on the ball. If you have two athletes turning the same speed and one has arms that are six inches longer, that athlete is going to throw it farther.”

Hunsucker, said Malone, must compensate “for that difference in leverage by how fast she moves. Fortunately in Emily's case she's fast enough and can accelerate quickly enough and has a low center of mass to where she can handle that speed.”

Eventually, she will become better at handling more of it. The hammer's biggest challenge, Malone continued, is two-fold: “How fast can you move, how much speed can you handle? She is working on that portion of it – working the orbit correctly, the timing, the rhythm. Once that all falls in place, you say, ‘Well, I'll go as fast as I

possibly can.' She's not at that point yet. In actuality she's probably going at a 50 or 60 percent speed."

Despite her size, Hunsucker had several huge redeeming qualities. Her work ethic and determination were apparent to Malone, who had worked with Hunsucker and her brother in high school camps. But something else caught Malone's eye: "If I was a Russian hammer coach, an Eastern Bloc coach looking for talent in the hammer throw, one of the first things you look for is explosive ability – regardless of height," he said. "That's something Emily has always had – strength and explosive ability. She can accelerate herself and the implement very well."

Malone points to UCLA's Ida Storm, a 6-3 Swede who currently has the third-best throw (68.05 meters) among NCAA women. Storm, said Malone, can survive perhaps sloppier technique because of her leverage advantage. Of course, Hunsucker can't count on a late growth spurt pushing her to 6-3 in her fifth year at CU, so she must get the most from her technique and speed.

The current NCAA women's leader (69.80) is Arizona State's Chelsea Cassulo, who at 5-8 is not much taller than Hunsucker. The Pac-12 Conference is a mecca for female hammer throwers. In its national top 20, Track and Field Results Reporting System (tfrs.org) lists five Pac-12 student-athletes, with Hunsucker No. 20 at 61.03 – her personal/CU record set at Mt. SAC.

Malone believes Hunsucker can throw further, as does Hunsucker. Both think she can reach the 62 meters probably needed to qualify for nationals in June. The 2013 Pac-12 outdoor meet – Hunsucker was redshirting and missed the 2012 event – is in Los Angeles May 11-12. CU will compete in the Jack Christiansen Invitational this Saturday in Fort Collins.

In four years, Hunsucker has improved from 49 meters, which qualified her for the Junior Nationals, to 61 – a rate that Malone says "most likely will slow down . . . but you improve another 10 meters and you're on the Olympic team. I wouldn't put anything past Emily; she has the determination.

"Just starting in the hammer is difficult, but getting past the 65 meters to 70 there are all kinds of new challenges. But with her work ethic, I would trust that she could overcome those elite level challenges as they present themselves . . . all Emily needs to know is that it's possible."

It will require as big a leap as she's made since first struggling to pick up a hammer, but Hunsucker has Rio de Janeiro and the 2016 Olympics in her sights. While in London last summer for a finance seminar, she attended the 2012 Summer Games and "hung out with some Colorado athletes and that really started the fire (to be an Olympic participant)."

A finance major/Chinese minor, Hunsucker envisions eventually starting a business in Boulder as a personal grocery shopper. "That sounds totally ridiculous, but I think there's a strong market here for people who are athletes and want to eat right," she said. "I have background knowledge in this and am really passionate about it."

To Malone, that means a good chance for success. "It truly comes down to this: she's always had to work hard to be good at this sport," he said. "It's never come easy to her . . . there are certain athletes because of size or power levels, they can just pick up the ball and have some level of success at the high school level.

"Emily wasn't able to do that; she had to work hard. It was instilled in her by her parents, and it just seems natural to her to work hard. If they all could be like her, it would be a coach's dream come true. It would make our jobs really easy."

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