

Sam Kendricks

by Sieg Lindstrom

“My job as a professional athlete is not to win the championship, it’s to be ready for the championship”

From the summit of the pole vault mountain in '17, Sam Kendricks talks with respectful awe of greats from the past. He is the current world champion, but he often mentions two U.S. names from the long-ago pre-fiberglass era: Dutch Warmerdam, the World Record holder for 17 years (1940–57), and Bob Richards, the No. 1 World Ranker for 8 straight years (1949–56).

“What’s the commonality?” Kendricks asks. “It’s that they did it for quite a while. Guys like Derek Miles, Jeff Hartwig, Brad Walker [the most recent American to World Rank No. 1 twice] even, were the face of this facet of the American sport for a long time.”

Kendricks, who has never no-heighted in competition, aspires to be like those guys.

Coached in the vault since 7th grade by his father, Scott, this year the 25-year-old Oxford, Mississippi, lifetime resident put up a season of the type he avowedly hopes to repeat many more times.

After taking last fall through much of February away from the vault to train with his U.S. Army Reserve unit—he was promoted to first lieutenant last spring—Kendricks leapt into an unbeaten 16-

meet season. His event has seen nothing like that since WR holder Renaud Lavillenie won 20 of 21 meets in '14 after a 19-win (but not unbeaten) '13.

His favorite moments were all firsts: his win at the Pre Classic, his world title (incidentally, he used just one pole throughout the comp) and a Diamond Trophy victory which ended Lavillenie’s string at 7 years.

After taking bronze in Rio, Kendricks wants to vault in three more Olympics—even though his 13-year-old brother has set a goal of beating him at LA '28.

In what remains of '17, Kendricks plans to marry his fiancée Leanne. Then he’ll head back to the vault wars full-out next year.

We caught up with him during his autumn training break, at home in Oxford, and jumped among the threads of Kendricks’ well-developed philosophy of vaulting—starting with consistency:

Kendricks: Sometimes it’s lumped on pole vaulters that they’re estimated to be inconsistent at times before they ever step on the track. I’m trying to break that mold. I want to be the

field event athlete—just like a thrower or any other event athlete—that’s going to be in the mix in every championship situation that he’s putting the USA jersey on. That’s my goal.

So coming off [last fall’s] Army commitment, nothing really changed. I had to give up a bit of an indoor season. All of these things work as a double-edged sword. I had less competition experience in 2017 but I had more rest so I didn’t have as much competition fatigue as other guys having to chase the standard.

I had a lot of experience and a lot of confidence coming off the Olympic Games and my championships [USATF, World Indoors] which really kind of gave me a handicap on training, so to speak, in that it was not that hard for me to step back into my role.

I’m not going to claim that I started from square one in 2017, that is not the case, I have a whole fleet of people here in Oxford helping me. It takes a whole town sometimes to lift somebody up the World Championships level, for sure.

I was certainly able to rally, get a good frame

of reference for what I was capable of early in the season and then go compete. I was lucky to be able to jump pretty high in the indoor season so it really kind of set me off on the right foot. As soon as that ended I had a month and a half to myself, 6 weeks before the outdoor season started. You can get a lot done in 6 weeks, you surely can.

T&FN: I've read that sport scientists say a break can give an athlete's brain and neuromuscular system time to "wire in" technique.

Kendricks: We used to use the analogy of a mental librarian. They had to find some time to file this new information away in a place that it could do you some good.

T&FN: I guess your inner librarian did a great filing job last winter.

Kendricks: I always make the joke, "Hey, Sam, are you ready to jump today?" and I would say, "Oh, yeah, I'm always ready."

Because that's my job. My job as a professional athlete is not to win the championship, it's to be ready for the championship.

If anybody else is expecting me to win then I need to surround myself with different people because they should know that if I'm ready to compete I'm ready to win, as well as I'm ready to lose. Because you can't underestimate or overestimate your competition because that's just not the respect of the sport.

T&FN: The book on Sam Kendricks from people who follow the vault very closely is that your jumps all look virtually the same. But is

that possible as you move to really high heights like your PR at USATF?

Kendricks: You're on to something. I think that I touched the mastery of my technical ability back in 2015. Just once. I had perhaps one of the best jumps of my life. All pole vaulters and all field event athletes will remember that time where they actually did it as perfect as they could do it at that time in their careers.

It was at the Reno Pole Vault Summit. I actually set a World Record for pole vault efficiency. That means I jumped the highest bar comparatively to a pole that I was jumping on than anybody else had in history. I spanned a

distance of 1.36m [4-5½]; the plaque's sitting on my wall right behind me. That says Sam explored territory that nobody had ever explored before and was successful with it. (*He improved that "WR" to 1.37 [4-6] this June on his PR vault at the USATF Championships.*)

Kendricks: I said, "OK, I want to do that again. I don't have to be any better than I was that day." Now being able to do it the same allows you to kind of scratch the ceiling of what you're capable of more often.

T&FN: But how do you go about doing it the same? Taking a vault is a very complex movement.

Kendricks: My father [who is his coach] and I work as a partnership. He is kind of the spotter, so to speak, and I am the shooter. You can think of it kind of like a sniper team in the military—somebody to watch the target and watch your sticks and somebody to execute.

Coach K is the directioner, he's the guy who picks certain things. My job is to do it as close to the same as I can every time—the run has to be perfect—and that being done makes it easy for him to do his job. I don't have to be a hero, I just have to be more of myself more often and he can put that bar underneath me.

So jumping 6-meters at Sacramento was the product of me being able to do it so similarly each time—because if you can do it so similarly, you can do it a little bit better.

If I can say, "OK, every day I can jump 5.80 [19-¼]," I know where my feet have to land, I know what pole has to be in my hands whatever conditions it happens to be," if I can do that every day, I can scratch a little bit higher.

T&FN: With the caveat that on any given day that conditions—your strength, speed and fitness plus wind, temperature, the environment—will have a say too.

Kendricks: I was at my most strong in Sacra-

mento. I had one day—I was covering myself in ice towels the whole time—where I had the mental state where I knew what I needed to do to jump 6-meters, I had the legs to do it with and I had the day for it. If you don't have one of those, it's not going to work.

Renaud Lavillenie, he'll tell you

that if he didn't have the perfect conditions he would have never broken the World Record. I don't know, he's a pretty frightful guy, he's a nice guy, we're friends. He might tell you he could break it any day of the week. That's why

The Vaulting Fraternity

If you have ever watched Sam Kendricks compete, you know he likes to chat, joke and celebrate his rivals' clearances with them:

"I used to watch on YouTube all the great jumpers of the world, and I said, 'Wouldn't it be cool one day to be part of that?'"

"I said, 'When I make my first step into the SEC I'm going to attempt to know my competitors because these are the guys you're going to be competing with for years to come, this is your generation of jumpers.'"

"Then the NCAA was the next step. Then once I stepped into the professional realm it was kind of different. Everybody's there to make a living, represent their country, and it's very tense. I said, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa! Why does it have to be this tense?'"

"Between nations it should be, 'Hey, it's us up here representing this for our sport.' If we have a good time, it kind of puts a different image to what we're doing. And the guys want to have fun, they really do. But there's always a little bit of separation. There's a little bit of separation between the World Record holder and everybody else sometimes."

"Everybody's the best where they come from. You've got to put that pride aside in order to enjoy yourself. And also, a high tide raises all boats so the more I encourage you to jump high, the more I'll jump high."

"This is a long journey. I'd rather be competing with friendly rivals than just rivals. You eat and drink with these guys after every meet, we get on planes, we drive around together with our poles. I've slept on a couple of their couches a couple times in the past."

"Some of my best buddies are from Poland. Renaud is one of my good buddies now. I don't know if he'll ever see this, but in order to get Renaud's respect in order to become a friend, I actually had to beat him. The first time I beat Renaud was in Paris in 2015 [3rd to =5th]. The next time was at a very small meet in Paris that year, and I won."

"But you know who was videoing me for that event? Renaud's fiancée. So she eventually helped me beat her lover, which was funny. Afterwards, it was just a small meet—me, Renaud and a bunch of French people—so we really got to know each other."

I love him, though.

T&FN: You got what felt to spectators like a scare in the Worlds Q round when you had to clear 18-4½/5.60 on third attempt to stay alive. A miss would have ended your championships outing.

Kendricks: You know, it's funny. Sometimes people misunderstand the event and you get all this drama lumped on these situations where this happens. Heck, yeah, I am surprised you brought that up.

I missed twice—which I had not missed all year at 5.60 and rarely missed at it in training—but they give you three attempts for a reason and the third one is just as good as the first one. But a lot of times the psyche of the event doesn't allow you to refocus: "Omigood-

Kendricks In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Samuel Hathorn Kendricks was born September 7, 1992, in Oxford, Mississippi; 6-2¼/174 (189/79)

•**PRs:** 19-8¼/6.00 (=15, x W; =4, =7 A), 19-4¼/5.90i (=20, x W; 6, x A)

•**Schools:** Oxford, Mississippi HS '09; Mississippi '15 (turned pro after '14 junior season); now represents Nike

•**Coach:** Scott Kendricks (father) high school, college & pro; agent Jeff Hartwig

•**Major Meets:** =10)NC '12; 3)NCi, 1)NC, 8)USA '13; 2)NCi, 1)NC, 1)USA '14; 1)USi, 1)USA, =9)WC '15; 1)USi, 2)WIC, 1)OT, 3)OG '16; 1)USi, 1)US, 1)WC '17

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** '13-x/5; '14-x/2; '15-7/1; '16-2/1; '17-1/1?

ness, if I don't make this my shot is *finished!*"

That's a real young man's mistake. You've got to understand that, hey, jumping this bar is just like jumping any other bar. I had the right pole in my hands on the third attempt, but I could have made it on any other attempt had I been a little bit more prepared.

I think it's funny that people were so worried. Hey, a guy that's jumped 6-meters ought to be able to make 5.60 no matter what attempt it is. You ought to believe in him sometimes.

Sometimes I think I deserve the benefit of the doubt, but at the same time it's my prerogative to make everybody less worried. I had a lot of people back home say, "Oh my God, Sam, I thought you were done."

I said, "Well, you didn't think that hard. When was the last time I went out at 5.60?"

T&FN: OK, how about a tense moment where you had the upper hand, in the Worlds final. You had vaulted what would be the winning height, 19-6¼/5.95, led on misses even if Lavillenie cleared and he elected to pass to 19-8¼/6.01. What were you thinking?

Kendricks: You know, it's a funny yet extremely cool place to be in the mix at the top of a world championship. It's rather hard to describe to somebody who's not been there before what it feels like to say, "Hey, the victory is here on the edge of a knife." But I had put together my best competition. When I made 5.95 on a third attempt and put the pressure on Renaud to go to 6.01, he had one jump left.

I was jumping first, which means I could do two things. Honestly, I could do any number of

things but I decided to do what I did. I could pass the height altogether or I could jump at it. It was my competition to lose at that point. I elected to respect the *man* and take an honest effort at 6.01.

I had seen Renaud put together some of his best jumps earlier in the competition. A lot of

bars, and I said, "Well, if he makes this I will not be surprised."

In Rio he had the chance to jump 6.07 for the win on last attempt and didn't make it, but I had seen him rally, he had beaten me before on this type of bar several times. But make or miss, the competition wasn't over at that point.

I elected to jump it, missed it. He took his jump and missed it.

T&FN: You won without having taken the last jump of the competition. Did you consider taking two more shots, perhaps even at a new American Record (19-10¼/6.05)?

Kendricks: There are very few days—you can count them on one hand—where you're as strong as you possibly can be. We recognized that I had put together some great jumps that day, and to reach any higher is to tempt fate sometimes.

I learned that from my buddy Renaud. I don't know if you know the story of his World Record in 2014 but he broke the World Record by 1cm and he attempted to break it again by 5 more centimeters. And he came down, crashed and burned and put stitches in his foot. That's a little bit of pride coming before the fall.

I thought to myself, "Sam, would jumping at the American Record, make or miss, make this day any more special?"

And I said, "No, it wouldn't. Let's go get a hot dog. We've put together a great competition and we'll save the American Record for another time."

T&FN: Did you find a hot dog? How did you celebrate?

Kendricks: I was in drug testing until 3:00 a.m. but as soon as I went back to the hotel my roommate, Andrew Irwin, had left me a pizza. He had left it from dinner the night before. He said, "Sam, we left you a pizza, champ."

I was like, Oh, hell, yes! I chomped down that pizza and then I fell asleep for like 5 hours and then went to do various victory stuff the next day. □



Kendricks counts WR holder Lavillenie among his good buddies

KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

people don't know this about the vault, you're only guaranteed one, maybe two, great jumps in a championship. If you're really consistent you might get three efforts.

I was getting better throughout the day but I had seen Renaud's best efforts at lower

and I had really struggled up to that bar.

"5.83 [19-1½] I had just made by the skin of my teeth, by just that much. I was getting ready to go to the next bar and I asked Coach K, my dad, 'Hey, what do I need to do to make this next bar?'"

"He looked me in the eye and he said, 'Sam, you're not going to make it, go kick it off.'"

"I said, 'Oh, man, don't tell me that.'"

"He said, 'You know what, Sam? It's the truth. You don't have what it takes today to jump that high.'"

"I took one more jump at it and I said, 'You know what? You're dang right.' I had to understand my limitations and that sometimes it's not your day."

"As a young athlete, it's hard to take that little hit to your pride to say, 'Hey, I'm not as good as I once was today.'"

"Sometimes people look at that as a negative impact on a competition. I see it as a positive one: recognizing that I did all I could that day and then looking forward to the future."

Don't Dwell On Today

Sam Kendricks' convictions about the conditions that must be met to jump a PR—or prospectively an American Record—are firm. He believes just as firmly that occasionally vaulters just get up on the wrong side of the bed:

"Sometimes it's not your day. It's funny, when I was in London in 2016 for the Diamond League meet, the bar went to 5.88 [19-3½] and I was jumping first. It was just myself and Renaud left in the competition