

Jenn Stuczynski

by Jon Hendershott

In just about two years, Jenn Stuczynski went from being a rank beginner in the pole vault to the American Record holder at 16-0 and the world's equal-No. 2 performer of all-time.

It has been a literal quick rise for the 26-year-old New Yorker and her coach, Rick Suhr, even though the rapid ascent was stalled by multiple injury problems last year that kept her from jumping from the Nationals until the end of the July. The litany included a back problem, then a sprained ankle which moved up to the Achilles injury that hampered her at the World Champs.

T&FN: Rick says a big thing that makes you so tough as a competitor is your total belief in his coaching system (see sidebar). Why do you believe so wholeheartedly in his coaching method?

Stuczynski: It is the only system I've ever known; the only way I've ever jumped. It's at the point now—and I don't know if it's arrogance or what—but I look at others and think, "If they only did it like this."

It's how I did it, so I think that they could jump better this way. With Rick's system and how he taught me, and the progressions I've gone through to get where I am, that's what I believe.

Coaching is an art, too. A football coach might know a lot about the game but if he can't communicate and motivate, what's

the use? Rick has the ability to coach and motivate with a model that I think is the best.

T&FN: And it must be a model that can be used with other athletes, like Mary Saxer and some of the other high school vaulters Rick coached. So it isn't just a Jenn Stuczynski-specific technique.

Stuczynski: Yes and everyone is a different athlete. Everyone can do different things. Some can't do what I do and Rick understands that and works with each athlete individually. So it's not like robots coming out of here. Everyone's her own person. But I've been with him long enough that I'm able to do each thing that he has taught me.

T&FN: You were mainly a basketball player in college but also did some track; you were 2nd in the NAIA javelin. But was there one thing about the vault that caught your eye?

Stuczynski: There were just a lot of things

that were very odd about it. I remember watching a guy jump in college and I asked him, "Are you going to the Olympics?" He was jumping 12-feet but it seemed like such a huge jump.

I was afraid of the vault, really. I just wasn't really sure of it. I started with four lefts—four left strides or a total of eight steps in my approach. Yet the way I've gone in such a progression, nothing about it was overwhelming. Now I go back there to the start of my run and I'm not scared at all.

T&FN: Rick saw you and some of your athletic talents. You were a heptathlete so had good all-around abilities. He asked you several times to try it but you said no until you finally did decide to do it.

Stuczynski: I remember being in basketball practice and the vault pit was in the corner of the gym. Jumpers were over there practicing and there was a bunch of kids gathered around doing the same thing. It was just interesting to me, because at Roberts nothing really exciting goes on. I thought it looked exciting.

Rick talked with me a little more and said, "I think you could be really good at this." I don't know why to this day that I believed him. I had never met him before, and yet I believed him. So I started to work on simple things and I just had a belief in him early.

T&FN: So when did you first start feeling really confident?

Stuczynski: As far as technically when I jump... you won't believe this, but about two months ago. Just recently, I feel I can go out and vault and each jump is going to be consistent as far as me knowing where I am in the air. Even if something isn't good at takeoff, I know how to manipulate the jump to still make the bar.

I'm able to feel that now. It took a long time. But right now is when I feel the most confident as a vaulter. My practice workouts show it. Last year, there were times that out of 10 practice jumps, I completed only 2 of them. I can complete 9 out of 10 now. There's just a confidence with my vaulting. Technically, I'm starting to get good habits.

T&FN: Was your first competitive jump, in fact, 8-6?

Stuczynski: Hmm, gee, I think it was something like that. I didn't even bend the pole. I probably landed on



VICTOR SAILER/PHOTO RUN

“... I’d probably be running some distance; just taking jogs around the neighborhood and walking the dog. Those are probably the most athletic things I’d do.”

my feet on the pad.

T&FN: *In high school, you did various sports, including softball in the spring as well as track. But were you even aware of the vault for women at that point?*

Stuczynski: It started when I was in high school and they held tryouts among the girls. It seemed like 50 girls wanted to try the vault, so they had a contest: whoever could do the most pull-ups was going to try the vault.

I remember at one meet the officials asked me to catch a girl’s pole and I had no interest in watching the event at all. I thought, “Can’t you get someone else to catch her pole?”

T&FN: *Have you ever considered what you might be doing athletically and personally if you had never tried the vault?*

Stuczynski: I would have been out of graduate school now with a master’s in school psychology. Hopefully I would have a school job and would be involved in high school sports, probably basketball.

On the side, I’d probably be running some distance; just taking jogs around the neighborhood and walking the dog. Those are probably the most athletic things I’d do.

T&FN: *It seems that the vault quite literally turned your life upside down.*

Stuczynski: It did change it to what I’m doing now. And mentally too. In basketball, I don’t think I was as mentally tough as I am now. There are so many things you deal with, ups and downs. A lot of people might have trouble with that, but with a coach who expects it of you, you become tougher that way.

Some people have to see a sports psychologist, but that’s the way I’ve always been, just very competitive.

T&FN: *Has the vault come to reflect who Jenn Stuczynski is as a person?*

Stuczynski: It’s the mental toughness part, yes, but it’s also made me appreciate things more too. Talking with high school girls, it’s also made me a little more compassionate. I understand where they are, because I used to be there.

I look back now at how I’ve developed and matured with that and one thing I like to do is sit down and talk with people about that. I get a lot of questions from pole vault girls. I like to answer questions because it’s something I think I can help them with.

T&FN: *It took you basically a year from when you started to reach 15 feet. It*

took Feofanova four years, Isinbayeva and Pyrek five, Dragila six to hit 15. Do you even consider how fast your rise has been?

Stuczynski: To me, the next height is just the next height. When you start thinking like, “Wow, I can’t believe I did it this soon,” you become complacent.

But I look at it like, “Why did it take me so long?” It’s two different views but I do feel, “It should have happened sooner.” I feel, “It

The Coach Analyzes His Star

Rick Suhr (“shure”) is the only vault coach that Jenn Stuczynski has ever had. What, in his eyes, makes her stand out?

“Jenn has a tremendous, total belief in the coaching she gets and in the system we use,” he says. “I just don’t see that belief as strong in other Americans. They make changes in coaches and end up going backwards rather than progressing.”

Suhr has a personal tenet which underscores his unique method of teaching the vault. He says, “I feel that a lesser-known system totally believed in will be more effective than a wider-known system not fully believed in.

“Belief and confidence are the mental components that will get a vaulter to jump high. The belief in the system and the coach.

“Many European jumpers have faith in their particular coach and his system. Europeans are obedient to coaches. By that I mean, they believe in the coach and the way he teaches the event. Stacy Dragila has said for so long, ‘You must trust your coach.’ That is so true.”

Besides Stuczynski’s physical assets of height, speed and natural athletic ability, Suhr also feels that another plus for her is her desire to compete.

“Stacy and Jenn both are so competitive,” he says. “They are eager to cross the Atlantic to meet the top European vaulters. Besides that attitude, Jenn’s mental toughness is unbeatable. And again, she believes in our model and the coaching she gets. That’s why she has jumped so high so early in her career.”

should be happening now.” I’m getting to the point where people say, “Oh you’re so good.” But I feel, “Oh no.” But since you can become complacent with what you’ve done, I don’t even pay attention to it.

T&FN: *What have been your most thrilling and most disappointing performances so far?*

Stuczynski: Easily my most thrilling performance was jumping 16-feet. Most people remember the first person to do something and not the second, so I wanted to be the first American. I also wanted to jump it in New York and it felt so great to do that.

Most disappointing probably was the whole trip to Osaka. Going over, things were looking good in workouts, but I just sort of crashed. Things just caved in at once. The whole outdoor season last year was disappointing.

T&FN: *Even though you jumped two American Records and got that 16-foot jump?*

Stuczynski: Yes, because I wanted to go

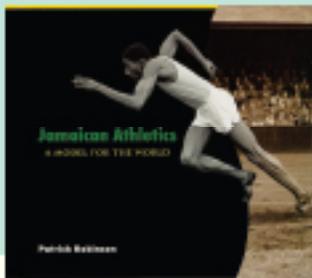
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to Europe and I wanted to make a real mark over there. I did 16 in the U.S. and I wanted to go overseas and do it. I was ready, but then one thing after another [the injury onslaught] came up. So when I look back on it, it was just bad because what I thought I could do, I didn't even come close to doing.

T&FN: What do you feel is the most important lesson you learned from a season like last year?

Stuczynski: I learned a lot, especially from what it's like to be motivated while injured. It's a hard thing to do; to go back and do the things you're capable of doing, yet you can't jump. There were a lot of drills I did; a lot of lifting. And it was hard to stay motivated.

I was depressed. It was weird, because pole vaulting is my life and livelihood and when I

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couldn't do it, it was a scary thing.

So staying motivated and wondering when things were going to get better was a huge thing. I learned a lot in that, especially a lot of patience. Last year, I'd miss in practice and I'd get so upset. I just had too much emotion.

Now after I jump, I try to look back and analyze it. What happened; why was it a miss? Be analytical instead of getting all frustrated. So I learned a lot as far as how to control my emotions when I'm jumping.

Also, I learned you're going to win some and lose some, and you'll be injured. You'll have ups and downs. I've had to learn to separate that from the rest of my life, where I don't get down for the next couple of days until something good happens. I've learned, take 15 minutes and then get over it.

T&FN: What do you feel you have to do overall to keep improving?

Stuczynski: First, with PR heights, I don't think it's going to be that tough. Just yesterday we set up a laser timer in our training building and we haven't trained specifically on speed at all. But I'm faster now than I was last year.

I'm just getting used to vaulting and I'm becoming a better athlete. So everything is coming along, even though we haven't focused on some parts yet. This year was the first time we introduced things up-top, on bar clearance.

I've kind of borrowed from Peter to pay Paul as far as giving up some things I did well in the vault to work up-top. But now I'm coming back to it so it's always a cycle, coming back around to what you learned first, from the run to the takeoff. Then you slowly implement different things with it.

Once I can execute them, then we can begin working on speed and that will get me even higher. Then work on strength. It seems that that will get me to higher heights and PRs will come. I'm not worried about it at all. □