

Brad Walker

Reigning indoor and outdoor world champion Brad Walker has ranked either No. 1 or No. 2 in the vault the last three years. In '06, the Washington grad—who will turn 27 the week before the Olympic Trials begin in June—became only the fourth American ever to top 19-8¼, vaulting's magic 6-meter barrier.

He begins the Olympic season rated as the man to beat for gold, with one of his most powerful weapons being his consistency. In his three years in the World Rankings he has scored the dreaded no-height in only 5 of 71 meets:

T&FN: To what do you attribute your consistency?

Walker: I think what can make the pole vault more inconsistent than any other event is that there's an extra variable in the mix and that's the pole itself.

In the vault, you have the pole and then the crossbar. That extra variable throws everything off the traditional approach in track of run as fast as you can, jump as high or as far as you can, or throw as far as possible.

I don't really have an answer why my consistency has been as good as it has over the last few years, other than the fact that a lot of times just mental preparedness comes

into it. The way you prepare for a season in general gets you ready for almost anything the event can throw at you.

If you know you have trained as hard and as smart as possible, done the right things, eaten right and slept right, all those sorts of things, then I think you get really confident in your abilities and that confidence translates into consistency in the pole vault.

T&FN: Is part of it, too, knowing how to best use your experience?

Walker: There's no question. One of the most consistent vaulters hands down has been Jeff Hartwig. Here he is, 40 years old and jumping high consistently and doing it more than anybody else. The experience itself is a big thing in any event, across the board.

The athletes who have been in it the longest, raced the most or jumped or threw the most, have the best chance of doing well.

T&FN: '05 was your breakout year; was there one meet, or even single jump, where you felt you had "arrived" as a world-class vaulter?

Walker: I think that a lot of people then, myself included, put 5.80 [19-¾] as a "magical" barrier. I told myself if I could jump 19-feet in college, that could give me the chance to have a special career in the pole vault.

I was able to do it indoors in '03; I won my first NCAA title indoors and jumped 19 so I felt if I could do 19 fairly consistently, I could hang with the guys doing it post-collegiately.

T&FN: So it turned out just as you thought.

Walker: It turned out to be true.

I think that when you get a certain PR—whether it's 5.80, 5.90 [19-4¼], 6.00 [19-8¼]—the hard thing is to duplicate it. Get that second time. After that second time, you can do it a third, fourth and fifth time.

After I got that first 5.80, it took me a while to get it again, and I'm still waiting for that 6-meter mark to happen a second time.

But 5.80 is pretty consistently a mark—whether in Europe or anywhere—that will put you near the podium, if not on it. So that was a big mental breakthrough that made me believe I could take things to the next level.

T&FN: Does a vaulter just need a lot of repetitions of the actual act of pole vaulting to stay sharp in it?

Walker: Well, it's interesting because in '07 I practiced the actual jumping of the vault only six times. Most jumpers probably do the actual vault six times in three weeks. I never practiced from a long approach; always a short approach.

My back was pretty messed up [due to two bulging disks] and I just couldn't do it. Luckily, I have had enough repetitions in the past 15 years that I can do what I need to do when the time comes. Any event is more technical than anybody could imagine—and then the vault has that extra variable of the pole. So I think that also makes the vault more technically

by Jon Hendershott



Walker In A Nutshell

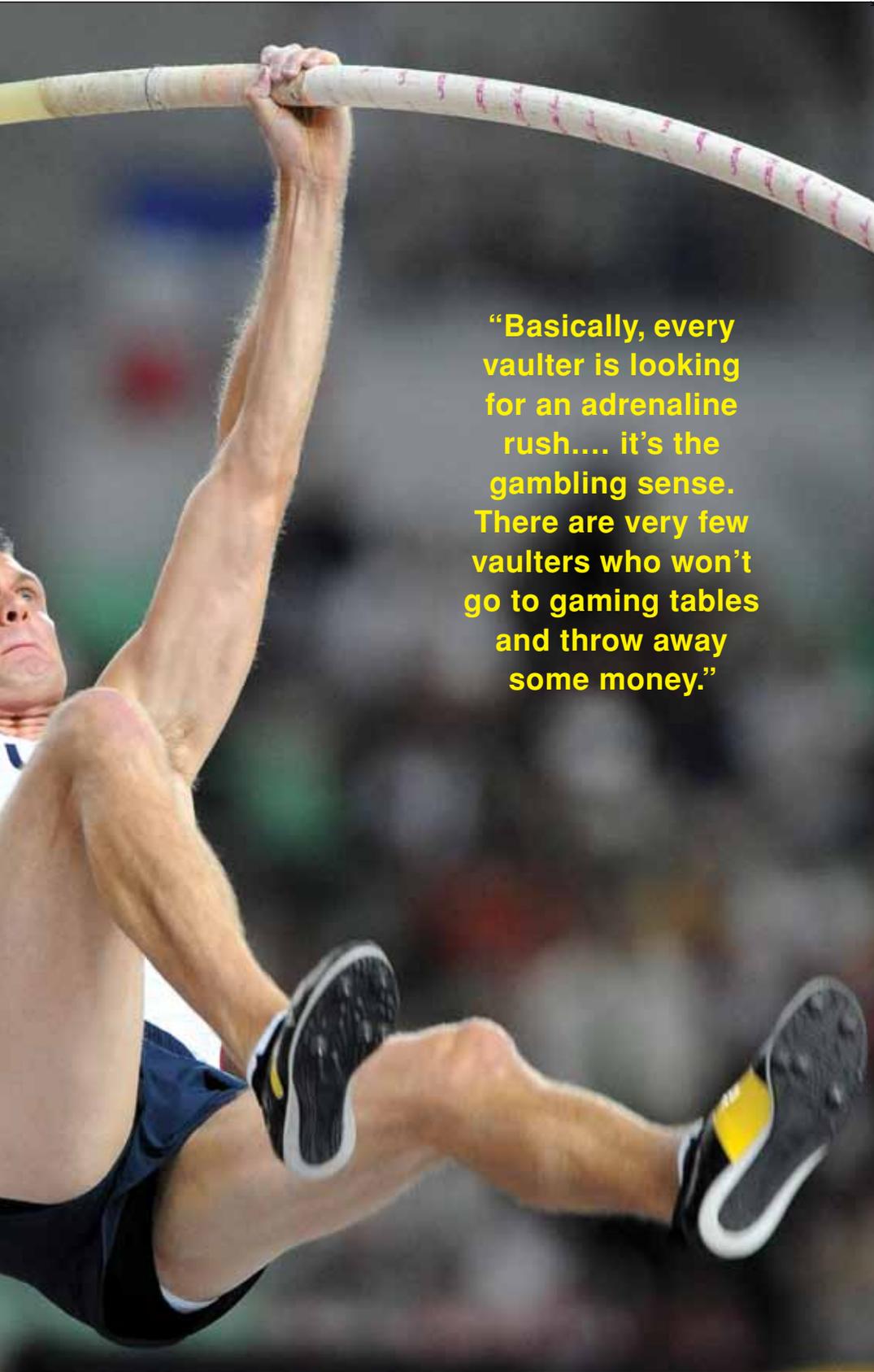
- **Personal:** born Aberdeen, South Dakota, June 21, 1981; 6-2/190 (1.88/86)
- **Schools:** University HS (Spokane) '99; Washington '03; now represents Nike
- **PR:** 19-8¼ (6.00) '06 (=9, x W; =3, x A)
- **Coaches:** Pat Licari (Washington; pro); Reg Hulbert (HS)
- **Major Meets:** PV—2)INC, 2)NC, 6)USATF '02; 1)INC, dnc)NC '03; 1)INC, 6)OT '04; 1)IUS, 1)US, 2)WC '05; 1)IUS, 1)IWC, =3)US '06; 1)US, 1)WC '07
- **World/U.S. Rankings:** '02 (x, 10); '03 (x, 7); '04 (x, 5); '05 (1, 1); '06 (2, 1); '07 (1, 1)

difficult than any other event.

T&FN: You were 6th in the '04 Trials and you're certainly a different athlete now. But how is that experience going to benefit you in '08?

Walker: I don't think I took 6th as hard as some people would have. I think that was because it was my first Trials. I was young and I hadn't really made the professional scene, so I was OK with it.

But it was more valuable than I can even



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being a vaulter? She must understand what the expectations and pressures are like.

Walker: The important thing—and what’s been really nice—is that she is another athlete. Specifically a pole vault athlete, but as an athlete in general she understands the sacrifices I make to be in top shape.

She also understands the emotional side of it. That I don’t want to hear bad news right before I compete, or I don’t want to get in a fight, or I don’t want to do something. So she’s really picked up on that and knows in a high-pressure

The Walker Haircuts

Brad Walker sometimes sports a new haircut at a major meet.

“The day in ‘06 when I jumped 6 meters, I had my hair cut and died over in Germany. It was a street meet; the people who were hosting us had a little barber shop so they cut my hair.

“Maybe it was just an isolated incident, but I also noticed that when I was in Australia at the start of ‘07, I cut a bit of a mohawk in my hair and I set a world-leading mark. Then a few days later I cut it a little differently and jumped 3cm higher for another world lead.

“So in Osaka, I thought back and noticed that every time I cut my hair, I had a good meet. Basically, a new cut lasts for only one meet. So I decided to go ahead and give it a shot and go for that little bit of luck.

“[Fellow vaulter] Jake Pauli was the guy. He had clippers and hair dye—it turned out a little more blue than black, but he said, ‘What if we throw some lightning bolts in there?’ I thought, ‘Why not?’ and it worked.

“[As for Beijing]it’s not something I plan. In Osaka, I just thought about it after the prelims and decided I’d like to cut my hair. There was no real design in mind. I haven’t given a lot of thought to what I might do in the future. But hopefully it will be fun and bring a lot of luck.”

situation to leave that stuff on the side. So that’s been good.

T&FN: *What do you see as your strongest assets as a world-class vaulter? What do you have to keep improving now, even if improvement is going to be harder and harder to reach?*

Walker: I think it’s kind of the same answer. The best way to describe it, probably, is that I feel I have a pretty strong work ethic and I work to the best of my ability. To get better, I have to continue that good work ethic. It has to be better than it ever has been. It has to be more precise; I have to take it up a notch to where I’ve never been.

Jumping 6-meters is great, but there’s still

mention because the pressures going into an Olympic year overall and then the Trials themselves are just indescribable to someone who hasn’t been there. The emotional roller coaster you have; the adrenaline you have at that meet; the panic you feel if you miss a workout or if something doesn’t go right. You can’t really describe it; in an event as tricky and inconsistent as the pole vault, the feelings are heightened even more.

So knowing what those feelings are and already having them stored in my data bank for the ‘08 Trials, I’m going to go in this time with a bit of an advantage. I’m going to be better prepared for the ‘08 Trials than I was in ‘04. Knowing the kind of emotional roller coaster that comes with that meet is really valuable in preparing for it.

T&FN: *Your girlfriend is Carly Dockendorf. What is it like having your significant other also*

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BRAD WALKER

6.14 and 6.15 [the outdoor and indoor WRs of 20-1¼ and 20-2 held by Sergey Bubka] out there. That's my mind set.

If those have been jumped only once or twice in history, then the outlook has to be elevated that much more. So having a good work ethic has gotten me to where I am. To get where I want to go, it just needs to continue to grow.

T&FN: At almost any level, does a vaulter need a bit of a gambler's attitude? When to enter, when to pass, when to jump.

Walker: The best reason I can give... A lot of people ask why the vaulters all hang together, why we're a close-knit group. The best answer I can give is that we all have similar attitudes. We all are extreme risk-takers. Ask Tye Harvey about his paragliding. A lot of the guys have

"At the last two Olympics, the guys who made it out of our Trials have won gold and silver"

done things that many people wouldn't try.

Basically, every vaulter is looking for an adrenaline rush. It's something that's fun and they all have similar mind sets. So when you talk about Tim Mack passing in the Olympics, and Isinbayeva also, it's the gambling sense. There are very few vaulters who won't go to gaming tables and throw away some money.

So we all have the same attitude. In a meet, the gambling is a bit of risk-taking in itself. It's something we love and strive for.

T&FN: Looking ahead, '08 is going to be unlike any other year for you. You're the world champion; you're one of the few 6-meter vaulters. Is that going to affect your mental approach because it's an Olympic year?

Walker: Everything positive that you can put on your résumé is a confidence-booster. So going into '08, in a track & field sense, the Olympics and the World Championships are the same event. They have the same people, from the same countries, in the same competition; just in a different location.

Knowing that I've gone against the best in the world and ranked No. 1 and had the highest jump of a season and all that, I'm confident going into '08.

At the same time, we've got to get through the Olympic Trials. I'm not by any means over-looking them or underestimating them. But I have been there and know the emotional roller coaster and what it takes to compete well at those types of meets. That's my focus: making it through the Trials.

If you look at the last two Olympics, the guys who made it out of our Trials have won gold and silver. So it's really important not to underestimate the Trials because once you make it through there, you stand a pretty good chance of doing well at the Olympics. Then make it through qualifying at the Games and then go really do it in the final. □