

Brigetta Barrett

by Jon Hendershott

Brigetta Barrett already is a star in the high jump, having won titles at 5 NCAAs, the '11 USATF and World University Games, plus claiming last year's Olympic silver.

The Arizona senior also is confident that she will be a star entertainer, whether as a singer, dancer or actor. She has sung the National Anthem before pro baseball games and football bowl games. She happily sings and dances as she prepares to jump.

It's all just part of who the bubbly 22-year-old is—and she wants to win an Oscar one day. The same determination and unshakable religious faith that helped boost her to athletic success she feels will propel her as a performer.

For now, though, "BB"—as she is called—competes in her final college season, looking for a high team placing as well as another individual title.

T&FN: You jumped 6-4¼ (1.94) in your first outdoor meet, at Stanford, after changing your approach from 10 steps to 12. What was behind that switch?

Barrett: Back when I first started high jumping as a high school freshman, I used like 4 steps. Then I went back to 6, then 8. When I went to college, I moved back to 10.

So, as I evolved as an athlete—as I got more powerful and more mature, as well as understanding what I was doing—my body felt constricted in a 10-step approach. I couldn't stay relaxed plus get the amount of power I needed in order to jump.

So moving back to 12 felt very relaxed. I think I might have been too relaxed and not thinking, "Run a little bit faster." But that makes sense because it was my first time using 12 steps. So I was very happy with the transition.

T&FN: Would you say you're starting to feel super-comfortable with it?

Barrett: Not yet, mainly because we [she and UA assistant Sheldon Blockburger] have been practicing with it only a week and half. But the greatest thing about the 12-step is that I felt like I was going so fast, yet so relaxed. I had never felt like that before.

I think that's something I need to focus on: when I get closer to the bar and higher in speed to stay relaxed and let it happen naturally. That's important so that when you get to the bar, the body does everything naturally for itself rather than you forcing it to make

something happen.

T&FN: Have you been able to put all of last year into any perspective? Or was that last year and now you look at just this season?

Barrett: I think that right now is a culmination of everything that has happened in my life up to this point. I can never get rid of those experiences. It was great, but I feel that possibly I started off this season a little too soon. But that's what comes with my decision to come back to collegiate athletics and having to train for the college season.

But other athletes probably got to rest a lot longer and they could decide, "I will just focus on Worlds so I don't have to start early. I can give my body, my mind and my spirit a chance to recover."

So I was battling that because I had a hard, hard, hard time coming back, especially in indoor season. I couldn't get myself mentally into it. My mind and body just really needed a rest. So it was very hard to shake that off in competition.

T&FN: You will forever be known and introduced as the Olympic silver medal winner. Is that difficult to live up to, or do you just try to put it out of your head?

Barrett: [laughs] I get so embarrassed. A hard thing for me, since I love being with people and being so open and having natural connections with them, is that I don't want my accomplishments to create a division between us. I realize that people might try to put me

on a shelf because of what I've done.

So there is a kind of battle within myself to learn to appreciate what I've done and yet not play it down too much because there is value in it. I try to look at it as, "Glory to God because He did it. This is the platform He gave me to use to reach people." But it's hard sometimes, because I do just want to be seen as a normal person, somebody who just walks down the street.

T&FN: Yet you must know too that for a long time to come, that isn't likely to happen?

Barrett: I do know that. I think I really understand that that's the true nature of the great blessing that happened to me. I think I do understand now everything that's being required of me. And I think I do try to take it with great grace and humility.

I really try to stay humble and give back as much as I can. I want that to be the mark of

my life, not the silver medal. I don't want the mark of my life to be just my jumping. I hope people can see that accomplishments are the fruits of their labors, but shouldn't be the be-all and end-all.

T&FN: An Olympic medal is a mark in your life, but not the mark.

Barrett: Yes, I like that. It's just the beginning of my dreams. I want to do so much more. I love acting, poetry, singing, talking with other people. I love life, so I want to keep living it and experiencing everything that life has to offer, in any shape that takes.

T&FN: Was a prime reason you came back for your senior season—and you could have gone pro after the Trials, let alone after the Games—for the Arizona team?

Barrett: Definitely. It was for them and for me as well. I would really like to give myself the chance to get my name on the Collegiate Record. I really wanted it indoors, but it didn't happen. But we still have outdoors to look for that.

Also to give my team the best chance to get on the podium. Athletes who have been cornerstones of the team for the past four years are leaving. This is like the culmination of it all—like "If not now, then when?"

So I just want to be able to give my efforts and lend a hand. Be there for somebody on the team who might be a freshman, like Liz Patterson ['08 NCAA HJ champ] was for me.

She was such a great jumper and she took the time as a senior to pay attention to a little annoying freshman. I followed her everywhere she went and watched everything she did.

I want to give an underclassman the chance to do that with me [laughs] and learn from my mistakes. It's like things are coming around full circle. So that was a big factor in me coming back for my senior year.

T&FN: And it's so natural for you give back in your own way. Have you always been that way? How did that evolve?

Barrett: I think of Maya Angelou's book *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. A lot of

Barrett In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Brigetta LaShea Barrett was born December 24, 1990, in Valhalla, NY; 6-0/140 (1.83/64)

•**PRs:** 400—55.13 '13. HJ—6-8 (2.03) '12 (=2, =3 A)

•**Schools:** Ketcham HS (Wappinger Falls, New York) 2006–07, Duncanville HS (Texas) 2008–09; now a senior at Arizona

•**Coaches:** Robert Stockslager (NY HS), Beale Tulbert (Tx HS), Sheldon Blockburger (Arizona)

•**Major Meets:** 2)USJr '08; =3) NCi, 7)NC, 3)US '10; 1)NCi, 1) NC, 1)US, 1)WUG, 10)WC '11; 1)NCi, 1)NC, 2)OT, 2)OG '12; 1)NCi '13

•**World/U.S. Ranks:** x, 4 '10; x, 1 '11; 4, 2 '12.



“I want to make sure I have a beautiful impact on someone else. Help build someone up because I know what it’s like to be torn down as a human being.”

the things I have dealt with in my life... just everyday things, like not being the pretty girl, or just feeling awkward growing up, or dealing with poverty or whatever. I feel that beautiful things happen out of hardship.

You can think of it like a seed. It’s shoved way down in the soil and has to push its way up and climb through that dirt just to get to some sunlight before it can bloom and become pretty.

I feel like that’s kind of been the story of my life—shoved down in the dirt in every way. I started singing around age 3 or 4 and I remember when people didn’t want me to sing. They would say, “Shut up! Stop!” But I would keep on singing because it gave me joy. It was about me, not that person.

Even though certain things in my life did hurt, I kept pressing forward. So to understand how it feels to be excluded or made fun of, I can now take that understanding and not treat someone else like that.

I want to make sure I have a beautiful impact on someone else. Help build someone up because I know what it’s like to be torn down as a human being. I’m so grateful if that’s how I come off and people understand that that’s really me. I just want to enjoy life.

T&FN: You do radiate joy when you compete. You smile whether it’s a miss or a make.

Barrett: I remember when I was a kid doing basketball—I hadn’t even done track yet—I didn’t play well at a tournament where I was sure I was going to play good. I sat and cried and no one came to see if I was OK or to wipe my tears away. Yet that was the best thing that could have happened to me.

After I was done crying, I wiped my tears off and thought, “OK, Brigetta, what did these tears solve?” Everybody can cry; Jesus cried. It’s a normal human thing. But you have to understand that after crying, you have to *do* something to get the desired results.

So many other people are willing to accept defeat. To be so damaged and devastated by something like a missed bar... that bar isn’t going to take away my health or define my whole life. It really doesn’t mean anything.

Even if it is on a big stage, it isn’t on a big scale. I can still walk away and say, “Glory to God. I still have my health, my family, people who care about me.” There are so many other great things that exist far outside of just clearing a bar.

T&FN: So how did you get into track?

Barrett: I walked home after that basketball game and saw some friends

running around a football field. They said they were practicing for the track team and I asked if I could try too. I turned out to be the fastest on the team.

Then one day I saw some girls high jumping and asked if I could try that. They asked, "Can you jump?"

I said, "Watch" and I cleared the bar. So I knew I could do something where I wouldn't have to run so much. I got serious about the high jump when I was a freshman in high school.

T&FN: *Were you attracted to track, as well as the performing arts, almost in defiance of the people who ignored you or told you to shut up? Did those things spur you on in some ways?*

Barrett: At first, it definitely didn't. It made me feel small. But my mom is a very resilient person, a very strong woman, so she taught me to believe in myself no matter what. She taught me, "You're the best."

You have to learn that somewhere along the line—and it's not that you're better than someone else but that you're better than what you've done.

I think it was the recognition of the freedom I exist in—whether it was the freedom in Christ or just the freedom in this life—that kept me moving forward even when people tried to push me back. I want people to think, "Look what Brigetta has done with her life."

T&FN: *Were you drawn equally to the arts as well as to any sport, but track in particular?*

Barrett: Hmm, no. I've always been an artist at heart. I never was an athlete at heart until I was forced to enter the world of athletics by realizing I could go to college through a sport.

But I was determined that whatever I did,

I was going to be the best at it. That grew out of insecurity because I felt like I didn't have any self-worth. I thought, "If I can't get people to like me for who I am, I can *make* them love me for what I can do." I could sing well and speak well; do things that would make people

as they made it seem like.

I wasn't ready to face that reality because that would have been the reality of my entire life: they loved my athletic ability or my singing ability or how I talked, but they didn't love *me*. Love me for my "self" without all those



Barrett sings, Chicherova is bemused

On Celebrating With Song

Circumstances aligned ideally in London to showcase two of Brigetta Barrett's prime talents.

First, of course, was her clearing a PR 6-8 (2.03) to claim the silver medal. That led to an impromptu performance during the post-competition interview.

Barrett was asked what she sang to herself while she competed. "It was a praise song," said the deeply religious Barrett.

A British writer asked, "Would you sing it for us?"

Not hesitating, she sang part of *Available To You* in her beautifully clear mezzo-soprano voice. Gold medalist Anna Chicherova (see photo) watched thoughtfully, while the roomful of journalists was captivated and all heartily applauded when she had finished.

stop and praise me.

I can say I definitely came to terms with that last year. Going into the Trials, I went through a breakdown. I did. A lot of athletes go through hard emotional times before the Trials because people expect them to make the team. But if you don't, then you have to go home and answer the questions from people who thought making it was everything. Yet you have to face the reality that a lot of those people probably didn't care for you as much

"It's a song that just expresses my constant gratitude to God, my constant source for everything," she explains. "You're saying to God, 'Do with me what you will.' So many people in life give only conditional love, but it's so wonderful to have that source of unconditional love. I couldn't do anything but sing, 'This is my story and I'm available to you.'

"Singing is my way of getting prepared to compete. I don't think it bothers other jumpers but I haven't really noticed. And it isn't about them. I mean, I would never tell anyone else how to get into her zone. I'm not opposed to how others try to focus and I hope they aren't opposed to how I decide to focus.

"I always try to not interfere with anyone else's preparations. My process works for me but I hope it doesn't hurt anyone else. It hasn't so far."

other things. But God has shown me that He loves me and that's the only love that's really important. He loves me for who I am, like so few others did.

T&FN: *You talked about getting the Collegiate Record, but at some point are you also looking at the American Record?*

Barrett: Oh yes! Even the World Record. That's really the goal, but I understand that before records can come, there is bettering my personal best. Then the Collegiate, then the American and finally the World Record. It's steps, but the ultimate goal is, we don't stop until Brigetta jumps at least a foot over her head. I'm 6-feet tall, so that's 7-feet and that *would* be a World Record.

T&FN: *But first, this year is for the team?*

Barrett: It is. And I can only hope that I've been a good leader. I just try to lead by example. I can hope that I've made an impact on someone's life; that I have given an example of hard work. I also hope that I have given people some knowledge and said things to them that I wish someone had said to me when I was in their shoes. I can hope that I always strive towards that. □