

Stacy Dragila

by Sieg Lindstrom

There are great athletes who seemingly find their technique, master it and then consistently reproduce it over a decade or more to reap records and medals. Edwin Moses comes to mind; Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson.

Other champions reach crossroads where they decide they must shrug off caution and take a calculated but necessary gamble in order to grab the brass ring—the gold medal, the World Record—and reach their potential. That is where Stacy Dragila—the women’s pole vault’s first world indoor champion, first outdoor champion, first Olympic champion—found herself this spring.

Analyzing Isinbayeva

That Russian rival Svetlana Feofanova finished the indoor season at the World Champs by taking the World Record hardly shocked Stacy Dragila. But what of Yelena Isinbayeva’s moving the outdoor standard up to 15-9³/₄?

Dragila: I wasn’t surprised. Just watching them from indoor Worlds, Isinbayeva came a long way; she started creating space [at takeoff] as well.

T&FN: The classic “Russian style,” sounds like, for which Feofanova’s takeoff is well known.

Dragila: Not that Isinbayeva takes off “under,” but it doesn’t seem like she’s on very big poles. She just cranks on the poles and bends them in half; I think she’s going to break them. And then instead of really jumping off the ground, it looks like she’s just sucked in under, the pole’s bent really far, she’s upside down forever, and she’s veering to the right side.

And I’m thinking, “Please land on the pit.” She’s scaring the hell out of me.

All of a sudden at World Championships she started creating a little bit more space. When she created the space and she drove down the middle of the pit, she was getting a little bit more in the middle, which made it much more safe for me to watch and not cringe at.

When you line up the pole like that and you take off right, you get that much more energy out of it. You’re not creating these two forces; you’re creating one and you’re going with it.

Then just watching her [in Europe in early June], she’d be kind of hitting and missing and veering to the right again, and then one jump she’d kind of hit it right and ride up the pole. And I thought, “You know, she’s got potential. If she hits it right, puts it all together, she could do it.”

With a switch to a new coach, a new training base and a new plan to significantly revise her technique, Dragila is now going for the gusto and willingly taking some lumps—in the form of a dip in heights cleared—temporarily she hopes.

After scaling an indoor WR of 15-8¹/₄ but then no-heighting at the World Champs in March, Dragila became frustrated with circumstances in her longtime base of Pocatello that annually forced her outdoors for training as early as the second half of March. She began considering a change.

Dave Nielsen, Dragila’s coach since her college days, was busier than ever with his real job, guiding the Idaho State team, and Dragila was tired of training in sub-40 temperatures.

She tried a warm-weather stint at coach Greg Hull’s Arizona training facility and says, “As soon as I got off the plane, I felt, ‘This is where I need to be.’” Hull, coach of Olympic champ Nick Hysong, was not tied down by collegiate duties. Hull is a friend of Nielsen’s; he had traveled to the World Indoor in Nielsen’s stead to serve as Dragila’s coaching eyes.

With Nielsen “still in her corner,” Dragila and husband Brent decided—though not without some

emotion—to move in among the cacti and make a coaching switch.

“After you leave a coach like that, after you’ve had great success, it’s hard. I mean I feel like I divorced someone,” says Dragila, who still values Nielsen’s support and friendship.

With young Russians Svetlana Feofanova and Yelena Isinbayeva having taken Dragila’s World Records indoors and out this year, and global championships ahead in Paris and Athens, T&FN caught up with the 32-year-old vault grande dame in London to get the scoop on her plans to fight back.

The key, Dragila says, will be a major change in her takeoff mechanics:

T&FN: What is it you’re trying to change in your technique?

Dragila: Dave and I have always known that we wanted to get my step out more. Traditionally I take off under, and I think maybe I learned that because Dave vaulted that way in the ‘70s. Early on and even last year, Dave would still jump with me a little bit, and I’m a very visual person. So I would watch him and to me that didn’t seem bad, but I created a pretty bad habit that’s obviously going to hinder me gripping higher on the pole and creating the space I think I need to jump those higher heights.

Dave and I have addressed a couple of these things in the fall for years but then we’ve gotten away from them during the season.

T&FN: How about a little Vault Takeoff 101 for the tech-challenged observer. When you say you want to get your step “out more,” do you mean you want to take off earlier?

Dragila: No, it’s my step at takeoff. A long jumper wants to take up every inch of the board they possibly can. Well, a pole vaulter at the elite level—all the women that I watched at indoor Worlds—were taking off at 12-feet [from the back of the box] and a little bit outside of 12-feet.

I tend to take off at 10-6, 10-feet. That’s pretty bad. So my angle and position at takeoff don’t enable me to really jump off the ground and be really tall at takeoff. That’s going to really hurt me gripping higher on poles and getting the pole to vertical a little bit sooner.

So Greg says let’s try to take this little steps by little steps; let’s try to get your foot out to 11-feet this year and feel comfortable with that.

At first it was really hard for me because the angle at takeoff and the pressure that I feel on the pole is that much different, and the timing is a little bit different, that I didn’t want to commit to it at times.

So it’s the whole thing. You can’t just change one thing and everything else is going to fall into place. Pole vault is such a timing event and a matter of sequence that if you don’t feel that the





first sequence of your pattern is right, it's going to be hard for you to finish off the complete jump.

T&FN: Have you had any jumps where it feels right yet?

Dragila: Yeah. I'm consistent at jumping at 11-feet now. Greg's really pleased with that. He says, "You're consistent at hitting your marks; you're consistent at taking off at 11."

Now it's a matter of creating the space at takeoff with my hands. That's another project we're working on. I tend to let the pole come into me at takeoff, where if you watch the men take off, the pole is out in front of them, their arms are stretched up and out in front of them. So they have all this potential to swing, much like a gymnast would on a high bar.

T&FN: Is this a work in progress? You seem a bit stuck around 15-feet this summer.

Dragila: I told Greg, "If I'm coming down here I want to stick to this plan, even though it might make me go down in the tank for a while."

T&FN: Which it has?

Dragila: Yeah, and I still kind of feel like I'm there, but then there are times I have great practices and I feel like I'm on the road. So it's been a hit-and-miss year, but I'm trying to keep my chin up and in a positive frame of mind. I think it's hard as an athlete to achieve what you've achieved and then feel like you don't know what the heck you're doing anymore.

T&FN: Who do you watch on video to see how it should be done?

Dragila: I think everybody watches a lot of Sergey [Bubka]. Sergey was a danged perfectionist. I don't really watch the women. I think we're all still learning so much. I think the guys would say that too. I think that's why we all do what we do: we're still trying to perfect what we're doing and what we think we can do.

But I think our best technician is Sergey and probably Maksim Tarasov from Russia.

T&FN: Am I off the mark to say that Feofanova looks more like Bubka than you do at takeoff, but you look more like Bubka in the air than she does? You fly off the pole at a much more vertical angle than she does.

Dragila: Exactly. I want to get that feeling at takeoff that they have, but I don't want to compromise what I do in the air, and that's so hard to do.

That's my asset. I know where I'm at in the air and I know where I want to be on the pole, but if I'm taking off where Greg wants me to take off, I feel like I'm not getting into the pit at all. And it scares me because pole vault is a dangerous event, and if you don't take off right, there's potential to get hurt.

But if I want to jump 16-feet and beyond, I need to create a little bit more space. [Not doing so] would ultimately hinder me from gripping a little bit higher on some longer poles which I need to be on to jump 16-feet.

T&FN: I'm trying to envision all the geometry here.

Dragila: I'm holding low for an elite vaulter. I'm holding at 13-8 to 13-11 on a 14-foot pole. If you drop the pole into the box, that's 8 inches difference—minus 8 inches. We call it "effective grip height," so now maybe I'm only holding at 13-1 to 13-2.

Well, it's going to be pretty danged hard for me to be holding that low and trying to jump 16-feet—3-feet over my grip height. The only person who was very effective doing that was Sergey Bubka. He was always 2, maybe 2½, sometimes 3-feet, over his grip.

That's asking a lot for a female vaulter to match that kind of thing on small poles when I'm not creating the same kind of energy that he is on the runway and into the pole. Pole vaulting is such a technical event; I mean sometimes I feel like I don't even know what I'm

Dragila Interview

talking about.

T&FN: Are you jumping on longer poles now?

Dragila: I'm on my smaller poles. I haven't been on my 14-7 poles this year at all. I've been on fairly small poles that I was on early in my career, jumping my 13-9 jumps on. I'm just trying to feel comfortable about getting the step out.

Greg says once I get my step out and I'm comfortable with where my step is, I can gradually, two fingers at a time, move my grip up, and that's ultimately going to get me on stiffer poles and eventually on my longer poles.

T&FN: How are your speed and strength levels?

Dragila: My speed going into the Nationals I think was my problem. I think that I probably should have jumped a lot higher. Being over to Europe before Nationals, I just had all this speed, and I don't think Greg had seen me that way. He was clocking me and he was like, "You are haulin' butt." But then because I'm going so fast, thinking that I have to run this fast, I can't see takeoff.

It's not that my eyes are bad. It's visualizing. I can't slow things down to see, to go, "OK, I've got to plant now, this is where I need to look." I don't feel all the things I need to go through; everything's happening so fast that it's just, Bam! I'm done. Whoa!

A couple of weeks ago we just had this

revelation that, "OK, we need to have rhythm on the runway, Stacy, not just bolt out of the back and go."

T&FN: How does your speed stack up against the other women vaulters?

Dragila: When Dave was over here last year, he thought that Svetlana was a little bit faster than me, and she probably is. But the biomechanist, Peter McGinniss, who works with us at Nationals breaks it down, and I've been the topic of discussion the last 5 years: "Stacy, you have the speed to jump 16-feet; you don't need to run any faster."

Every time at Nationals I am the fastest person out there. Sometimes I've run down there and been just as fast as some of the guys.

T&FN: How long do you expect it will take to get comfortable with the new technique?

Dragila: I don't know. I was hoping that I would have caught on a long time ago, but I'm trying to be optimistic about this and stay positive.

T&FN: Are you concerned with the World Champs fast approaching?

Dragila: We're going to go to camp for almost two weeks in Germany and I'll have three or four more sessions there. Things might just start clicking, I don't know. I hope that they do, but if they don't, I told Greg, "This might

Dragila Facts

•Personal: born Stacy Mikaelson, Auburn, California, 3/25/71; 5-7/140; married to Brent Dragila (rhymes with tequila).

•PRs: PV—15-9¹/₄, '01; iPV—15-8¹/₄, '03; Hept—5488(A) '98; Dec—5029 '97.

•Coach: Greg Hull; formerly Dave Nielsen (Idaho State). Managed by Peter Stubbs.

•Schools: Placer High, Auburn, California '90; Yuba CC '92; Idaho State '95.

•Biggest Honors: 1st '96, '00 OT; 1st '97 WIC; 1st '97, '99-03 USATF; 1st '99, '01 WC; 1st '00 OG. Set 7 World Records 1999-01; 10 World Indoor Records 1997-03.

suck this year; this might not be my year. I might not be on the podium in Paris, and that will really suck."

But as I look at it now, my ultimate goal is to get back on the podium in Athens. That's where I want to shine and that's where I want my moment to be.

The girls think they're jumping great right now, jumping 4.80-81-82 [4.82 is Isinbayeva's WR of 15-9³/₄]. Hey, that's great for them, but I want to be looking at the 5m [16-4³/₄] mark.

I told Greg, "I'm not happy jumping 4.80 [15-9]. I've done that before." I know that was an awesome feeling. But I feel like I've put myself in a new situation with a new coach to really try to get myself to where I think I can go.

It might take me a little while, but as long as I'm healthy, and I'm still having fun with what I'm doing, and I'm learning, that 5m mark is going to feel tons better than 4.82.

Dragila's website: www.stacydragila.com

Excellent Event Manuals from the British T&F Federation

The best individual event guides for coach and athlete in the English language. Technique, training, rules, conditioning, etc. Concise, easy to follow.



\$16.50 Hurdling, by Malcolm Arnold
Discus Throwing, by Max Jones
High Jump, by Frank Dick
Long Jump, by Bruce Longden
Shot Putting, by Max Jones
Training Theory, by Frank Dick
Triple Jump, by Ted King

\$19.95 Hammer Throwing, by Alan Bertram
Pole Vault, by Peter Sutcliffe
Javelin Throwing, by John Trower

\$19.50 Endurance Running Events, by Norman Brook

Add \$2.50 per book for postage and handling. Calif. residents add 7¹/₄% sales tax. Order from Track & Field News, 2570 El Camino Real, Suite 506, Mountain View, CA 94040. Visa/MC/Amex orders welcome. Phone 650/948-8188 M-F 9-5PT. Fax 650/948-9445.

NEW HY-TEK™ Sports Software

MEET MANAGER for Windows
Runs any T&F/CC/RR Meet, Connects to FinishLynx, Scoreboards, & Networks.

TEAM MANAGER for Windows
Best Times/Marks, Roster, Reports, ...

Pro ATHLETE for Palm OS
HotSync Athletes & Marks direct to Palm.

- Virtual Tour/FREE Demo -

252-633-5111

www.hy-tek.com

Track & Field News and Track Coach are available in microform from ProQuest Information and Learning.



Call toll-free 800-521-0600, x2888. International customers call collect 1-734-761-4700 or fax to 1-734-973-7007. Or mail inquiry to: Quest Information and Learning, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. www.bellhowell.infolearning.com