

Sandi Morris

Just as soon as she switched from hurdling to the pole vault as, in her words, “a little stick with no muscle but really quick” 9th-grader in Greenville, South Carolina, Sandi Morris sensed she had found her athletic calling.

When her parents, former Western Illinois multi-eventers, connected her with local vault guru Rusty Shealy—in fact, not so local but an hour and a half away by car—Morris says, “I had a perfect storm of I wanted to do it—there are so many little kids out there with talent but they don’t want it—I had fun doing it and I had the physical talent.”

Morris progressed from 8-feet as a frosh to 13-3½ (4.05) for the USATF JO title in ‘10, her senior season, and she broached 14-feet the next spring as a North Carolina yearling before her first-ever season with no progress in ‘12.

The next school year, seeking a reboot, Morris transferred to Arkansas and the tutelage of Razorback assistant Bryan Compton, her coach to this day. What a reboot it was.

By the end of ‘16 she was the Olympic silver medalist, outdoor American Record holder at 16-4¾

get strong. And I definitely had a lot to fix with my technique. When I lose strength it’s going to show more because my technique at this point doesn’t make up for it.

T&FN: In light of that, you accomplished a lot.

Morris: There’s a lot [of technique] we’ve been working on so this past season, it was a great year. I still came away with a silver medal in the World Championships not feeling 100%. I was solid No. 2 in the world pretty much the entire year. So I guess it says a lot for me personally to be disappointed in a year like that.

It was just a little bit disappointing for me because I know that because I know I’m a consistent 4.90 [16-¾]-plus jumper so to not break into that this season was a little bit disappointing.

I think the most exciting thing that I did this year was that I won USA’s outdoors for the first time. Last year I won Indoor and I won this year as well, but winning outdoors was a big feat for me, to add that title to my list.

T&FN: You ended Jenn Suhr’s streak of 5 straight outdoor titles and 10 of the last 11. Tell us about your performance in Sacramento.

Morris: I jumped 4.80 [15-9] that day and I would say that was the best I felt [during the season] and I was very capable of jumping 4.90-plus that day but I just didn’t have the right pole with me, I needed bigger poles. So that’s a good problem to have because that means good things are on the horizon.

T&FN: You didn’t have the pole you used to jump the outdoor AR in Brussels last year?

Morris: I needed to be on bigger poles than I was [in Brussels]. At USA’s they were able to record our speed on the runway and they measure how fast you are at takeoff. At USA’s this year I was faster at takeoff than I have ever been.

So that day I was capable of jumping a lot higher but I just went through all the poles that I had in my bag including the one I jumped 5.00 [16-¾] on.

What I’m dealing with right now

by Sieg Lindstrom

Morris In A Nutshell

- Personal:** Sandi Lynn Morris was born July 8, 1992, in Downers Grove, Illinois; 5-8½/143 (174/65)
- PRs:** 16-4¾/5.00 (3, =10 W; 2, 4 A)
- Schools:** Greenville HS (South Carolina) ‘10; North Carolina, Arkansas ‘15; now represents Nike
- Coaches:** Harry Morris (father), Terry Wyatt, Rusty Shealy HS; Josh Langley North Carolina; Bryan Compton Arkansas & pro
- Agent:** Jeff Hartwig
- Major Meets:** 11)NCi, 2)USJ ‘11; 11)NCi, 11)NC ‘12; 4)NCi ‘13; 4)USi, 4)NC, 2)US ‘14; 1)NCi, 2)NC, 2)US, =4)WC ‘15; 1)USi, 2)WIC, 2)OT, 2)OG ‘16; 1)USi, 1)US, 2)WC ‘17
- World/U.S. Rankings:** ‘14—x/3; ‘15—7/2; ‘16—1/1; 17—?/?

(5.00) and World Ranked No. 1.

T&FN caught up with Morris this fall as she touched base from flood-battered Houston, home of boyfriend Tyrone Stewart, Bermuda’s 3-time Olympic long jumper.

Early in the chat she revealed a back injury that meant she “never really felt 100%” in ‘17:

Morris: I would feel completely fine for a week or so and then something would just trigger it. Whether it was in the weightroom or a long jump session, my back would just lock up like a bunch of charley horses in my entire back, and I couldn’t breathe and then I’d be out of commission for three days.

So then the whole year I was kind of tip-toeing around the weightroom. I wasn’t able to lift the weight that I needed to in order to





“Changing to a new series of poles can take an entire season or two to get used to a new length of poles”

is I need to start raising my grip a little bit but the current series of poles that I'm on are exactly 4.45 [14-7¼] and I'm gripping as high as I can on those poles. In order to grip any higher I need to go to the next series of poles, which is a big difference.

It's not something you can do in one competition, it's not going to happen overnight. Changing to a new series of poles can take an entire season or two to get fully used to a new length of poles.

The problem is at this level the changes that you need to make in order to jump higher are such small micro-changes that it's very difficult to go up to the new length of poles.

It's not like the kid in high school who's improving by 2-feet every year; at this level we're inching our way up so changing to the next level of poles is going to be a lot more difficult than when you're a kid improving by huge gaps.

T&FN: Will you switch to longer poles?

Morris: Yes, the next series of poles are 4.60 [15-1]. The change is supposed to be very subtle but there's a lot of stuff that goes into changing poles. Even small things such as having space on top of your hand.

I'm used to holding the pole at the very top and suddenly there's space on top of it. You have to mentally be able to ignore the extra pole hanging off the top of your hand.

That's one small thing. And just the thickness of the poles. The new material that they use makes the poles skinnier and lighter, which I think is a good thing but if you're used to the old poles and you go to these skinny little things it's going to feel different and the timing's probably going to be a little bit different.

Also, just gripping up higher makes the jump slower. It's like the same concept as if you have a longer rubber band. You stretch

a rubber band that's really long and you let it go, it's going to have longer, slower response than a short, tight rubber band. If you go up to a longer pole and you're gripping higher, the timing of the jump is going to be slower.

When you first try a new length of pole, you measure the height exactly where you grip on

The (Fiber) Glass Menagerie

Ask hurdler Jasmine Stowers about her former youth track club teammate—T&FN did—and she'll tell you Sandi Morris loves animals: “She has a snake.” Morris still does:

“I have 3 snakes, a bird and a dog. I'm a very big animal lover and I always have been. I don't exactly know where it came from because my parents like animals but are not obsessed with them. I think it was just this childhood love that turned into a passion of mine in life.

“I would watch hours and hours of *Animal Planet* and I thought I was going to be the female Steve Irwin of the future—have the TV show with pets. And I would still love to do that. If I could somehow have an animal TV show post track & field career that would be a dream come true.

“I have a ball python and 2 red tail boas. But at one point I had 28 snakes and at that time I had a couple of breeding projects I was working on. I was really into it but obviously I don't have that time on my hands right now.

“I love outdoorsy stuff. I love to just take my dog and go exploring. I collect rocks. My dad's a geologist so he ingrained an appreciation for rocks in me. I'm always taking pictures of stones and sending them to my dad and asking, “What is this?”

I also play guitar and sing, whenever I have a chance I do that.

And I'm very crafty because of my mother. Right now I'm working on a huge scrapbook for my boyfriend because he's 8 years older than me and has been a professional track athlete now for like 10 years. He has pretty much every single bib number he's ever had and every article he's ever been in.

I was like, “Well, I'm here for a couple months in Texas so I'm going to make him a huge scrapbook.” That's what I'm working on now in all my spare time.

the old pole and you grip straight over, and then maybe you take an entire practice just trying to jump on these new poles and you might be able to and you might not.

It's all about trial and error. The pole vault is all trial and error.

T&FN: Will you begin that switch when you start your fall jump training?

Morris: Yeah. It's a slow process. My first competition will be the Pole Vault Summit, like it is every year, which is in January.

We always start the year jumping from short approach—6 steps or 3 lefts, we count by lefts—8 steps, and then slowly work my way back to my full approach, which is 14 steps. Which is actually really short. I know I have one of the shortest approaches of all the girls who were at the World Championships.

That just works for me. I hit my top speed really fast, I don't need a really long approach,

my acceleration is [snaps fingers] really quick.

Coach Compton has also talked about moving me back two steps but I have to pick which one I want to attack first, moving back two steps or getting on the new series of poles. You can't do both those things, possibly not even in a whole season. That would be a lot to change in one year. I would say you need a solid year of being comfortable on a new series of poles before trying to move your approach as well.

What we've talked about is me trying the new poles first because I already need bigger poles from the approach I'm already at. Why would I work on backing up even more and making those poles even smaller? Two more steps is probably going to give me even more speed at takeoff so that would make my current issue even worse.

T&FN: It sounds like you're saying the takeoff is your challenge right now?

Morris: We have a lot of work we need to do with my takeoff. A lot of people don't know this but my natural takeoff leg is my right leg. Growing up, I long jumped and hurdled off of my right leg. I did everything off my right leg; still, I notice if I go to run up the stairs or something I go off of my right leg. But I'm right-handed. They call it goofy foot.

T&FN: Like in surfing or skateboarding, but in those sports you don't need to also control a pole with your dominant hand.

Morris: Yeah. We have a lot of balance work and strength work that needs to be done for my left leg, but the problem is I also have a little bit of ankle issues so it's a matter of training my leg enough but not overtraining it to where it's going to get injured. That's the whole battle of being a professional athlete.

Especially in a sport like the pole vault where I want to do this as long as I can into my 30s. I want to make it through 2024, possibly even

2028 if I really feel like I can do it at that point.

T&FN: What is your greatest asset as a vaulter?

Morris: My strength is definitely my speed.

I could say with confidence I am the fastest pole vaulter in the world right now. But that doesn't mean anything if I don't know how

to say than just do it. I know it. Every athlete knows their flaws, we really do, and I'm working on that every single day of my career.

I haven't even had a chance to work on anything after the takeoff. The pole vault is a phase at a time. You have to complete the first phase in order to work on the second phase, and if you don't do phase 1 correctly you can't work on phase 2.

My speed is great but it also magnifies flaws. My form and technique is so much better from 10 steps than it is from 14 steps. I can almost jump just as high from 10 steps as I can from 14 even though I'm on a slightly shorter pole. But a lot of vaulters are that way.

My coach says, "If you could just jump the same way from 14 steps as you do from 10 steps you'd be breaking the World Record right now."

I'm like, "Well, I'm glad you believe in me but I've got to figure out how to do that."

T&FN: Well, that's something you can work on in the coming off-year.

Morris: The main goal for me is—a lot of people don't take indoor season that seriously but this is a chance to win a world title even though it's an indoor world title. So my main goal is to make those changes to be ready down the road for Tokyo, but my goal is to win World Championships.

At the same time I'm going to be working on trying to get on that next series of poles. It's hard to be competition-ready but also be making big changes. Because a lot of times when you're making big changes, you need to go down before you can go back up. That's really the main thing that's been holding me back from making these changes.

On top of my back issues from last season, I've had to be ready to jump high every single meet I go to. Sometimes you need a year like this where it's OK to go to meets and it's like an experimental competition. So that's going to be this year for me other than World Indoors, which I am really wanting to win because that could be really helpful.

Say I did win it, then I'd have a bye into the 2019 Worlds. Then I would basically be able to work even more on getting on those next poles. Then [early 2019] wouldn't be as serious for me needing to be on my game. □

Morris scribbles a conversion chart on her hand to aid in marking her runup



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to use that speed. I may have all the speed in the world but if I just run and then crash and don't know what to do with the takeoff then it's useless. So we're really working on that. We have been for years.

I kind of giggle whenever someone in the pole vault world, another coach or athlete, tells me, 'All you have to do is jump at takeoff.'

All I have to do [laughs]. It's so much easier

the podium next to someone I had grown up watching video of.

"For me it was never really about me wanting to beat her. I'm really not that type of person. It's just I'm going to go out and I'm going to jump as high as I physically can. It's a private thing for me.

"I also grew up playing volleyball and I never really wanted to do team sports where you go at it with another team and you hate the other team. I don't hate any of my competitors and it's not about me wanting to beat Jenn and

take over. It's just kind of a gracious passing of the torch from one generation of pole vaulters to the next.

"There was this moment when I was in Rio last year walking out for the Opening Ceremony, just walking out of that tunnel with all of my Team USA teammates, you look up and there's all these lights and I felt so tiny for a moment, everything's so big around me, but I kind of just said to myself, 'Hold your head high, Sandi. You belong here. This is what you were born for.' "

On That First Title

What did it mean to Sandi Morris to win her first USATF Outdoor, beating Jenn Suhr?

"I would say it's the passing of the torch. She always was a role model for me as an American pole vaulter and it was really cool that the first time that I got 2nd at USA's—that was 2014 and I just remember standing on the podium next to her for the first time—that was kind of my coming-of-age moment, realizing how good I could become standing on