

Jenn Suhr

by Jon Hendershott

Jenn Suhr started off her Olympic vault campaign on a literal high note, upping her own indoor American Record to 16-0 (4.88) at the Boston GP. But even before that, the '08 Olympic silver medalist earned her first-ever No. 1 World Ranking.

That honor came after an '11 season in which Suhr not only conquered her vaulting foes, but also had a health problem diagnosed: celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder caused by a reaction to wheat protein that can cause extreme fatigue.

So as well as an athletic accomplishment, the No. 1 Ranking honor was an emotional achievement for the native of western New York:

T&FN: How did you learn that we ranked you No. 1?

Suhr In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Jennifer Lynn Stuczynski was born February 5, 1982, in Fredonia, New York; 6-0/139 (1.83/63); married Rick Suhr on January 3, 2010

•**Schools:** Fredonia HS '00; Roberts Wesleyan '05; now represents adidas

•**PRs:** Outdoors 16-1¼ (4.92) AR '08 (2, x W); Indoors 16-0/4.88 AR '12 (2, 9 W)

•**Coach:** Rick Suhr

•**Major Meets:** 1)USI '05; 3)USI, 1)US, nh)WCup '06; 1)USI, 1)US, 10)WC '07; 1)USI, 2)WCI, 1)OT, 2)OG '08; 1)USI, 1)US, dnc-in)WC '09; 1)US '10; 1)USI, 2)US, 4)WC '11

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** '06—6, 1; '07—8, 1; '08—2, 1; '09—8, 1; '10—x, 2; '11—1, 1

Suhr: Rick actually found out during a workout and he came into our training building.

I asked him if he knew anything and he said, "No, just keep training."

So I finished the workout, then came up to the house and he told me, "You got ranked No. 1."

It didn't really register at first. It kind of all hit me at

once. And we had company over at that time, too. I had to leave the room.

I went in another room and I just sat down and cried. It was just so emotional. It had been a goal the whole time I have vaulted. To be No. 1 and to finally get that was just surreal. It was just unbelievable and such a great feeling.

It's humbling, too, because of all the work that you have put in, the struggles and dedication of two people working together to achieve something. And then it happens and it's just a very humbling feeling. I've never felt something like that before.

T&FN: You started out the indoor season with a no-height in your first meet. But then a week later, you went 16 for the AR. Was there anything special behind being able to jump that high this early in what is going to be a long season?

Suhr: Everything was set up perfectly. I had two months of solid training, uninterrupted.

The gains I got in strength and technical adjustments were tremendous. So everything went as planned this season, the main thing being healthy and staying healthy.

When we had the no-height, as a pole vaulter that's something that is constantly in your head. You worry about it and you realize how easy it can happen. But Rick said to me, "You're jumping well. This is just what can happen. We just have to understand why it happened and what to do to fix it."

We considered everything and Rick finally said, "You can get the American Record; you're jumping that well." So we changed my mind frame from, "I just no-heighted" to "I can jump higher than I have ever jumped indoors."

That's what good coaching does; it helps you believe in yourself.

T&FN: We all know where everybody wants to be this August, but how will your '08 experiences help you this year?

Suhr: I think that having been there and having won a silver medal already means that you understand the process that goes into it. You understand the pressures you're going to deal with.

In '08 I had a hard time just hearing the word "Olympics," or about the Trials, or Eugene, or seeing billboards talking about you don't want to be in 4th place. It was very pressurized and it got in your head.

So in '08, I did have a problem with that. But this year, I definitely have learned how to talk about it on a very surface level where I don't have a lot of emotion in it.

Now when the Trials come around, I don't really anticipate them more than I have to. When they come up, I'll be ready for them.

But to think about and linger on it just doesn't make



On learning she had earned No. 1 in the World Rankings: "I went in another room and I just sat down and cried. It was just so emotional."



sense. It's too far down the road right now. To get the anxiety and stress up this early isn't sensible because so many things can happen.

T&FN: *Speaking of 4th place, was placing 4th at the Worlds in Daegu a disappointment to you—even if you beat Yelena Isinbaeva, who was 6th?*

Suhr: In that situation, just having as much go wrong going into it—my back injury, catching a cold, getting there late—I told Rick that a lot of times after a competition, I wish I could rerun the meet right away. But that's one situation where I was very glad the meet was over.

Yes, it was disappointing, but I did the absolute best I could have done and I couldn't have done it again. I pulled out everything I had—every ounce of energy.

T&FN: *What was the back problem from?*

Suhr: That was the craziest thing. Everything was going perfectly and I actually thought to myself that it was the best I had ever felt going into a big meet.

But about three days before we were going to leave for Korea, I woke up one morning and my stomach hurt.

Rick was cracking jokes and I told him not to because it really hurt to laugh. About three hours after that, I couldn't even get off the couch. My back had gone. Even now, we don't know where it was or what it was.

Then we decided to go to Daegu about 48 hours before the qualifying and we didn't sleep on the plane. Then when I went to the stadium to do a little shakeout, I pulled my hamstring. But the most recurring thing has been the tendinitis in my left Achilles tendon.

MARK SHEPHERD

T&FN: *So what makes you so tough that you can cope with all those problems?*

Suhr: Those things all were disappointing, so the big thing is having Rick here. Otherwise, I would just sit on the couch and pity myself away. It's just having someone else with you who has the same goals and is wise in his

Packing Poles A Problem

Making certain that the very personal implement central in the pole vault—the pole itself—gets to a competition is critical for vaulters, explains Jenn Suhr's husband/coach Rick:

"You have to think ahead in this game. We carry 8 or 9 poles with us and if something happens to them, we're going to lose significant training time. The security of the poles is absolutely imperative.

"It's not like a shot or any implement that a meet can provide. When we came back from Zürich last year, we didn't see our poles for over three weeks. We got away with that only because the season was over.

"If you lose the poles, that's obviously an issue. But if the poles are destroyed—and that's happened a lot with vaulters—you're at such a disadvantage. It will take a minimum of a month and maybe up to six weeks to get those poles made correctly again.

"The transporting of poles is something people don't remember about the vault. For the 100, you can show up with your racing spikes and you're ready to go. But you can't do that with poles.

"And borrowing poles does not work. Poles are made to the exact weight, length and flex that a vaulter needs to perform best. The transfer of poles is something that, after all the years, no vaulter really has perfected. After you have seen a vaulter break or shatter one, you can understand why they are so finicky about their poles.

"There is a huge confidence factor of being on your own poles. We have had Jenn's poles for about four years. The majority of her poles are the same ones she used in Beijing. But you take away a vaulter's own unique poles: it's like Kryptonite to Superman."

outlook. That's what helps.

When I want to feel down and I'm disappointed and discouraged, he says, "No, you can go in the building and do drills and get better. Then when you can start running again, you already have done this work." So it's having that other person pushing and helping you through it. Without that, it would be impossible.

T&FN: *So it must have been a huge plus to finally get the celiac problem diagnosed.*

Suhr: It definitely was. Just to be able to do full workouts again and get my strength levels back up. When it hit around last April, my strength levels began to deteriorate fast.

I couldn't figure out what was going on and the more I looked at it, the less strong I got. The more I ran, the slower I got.

So it was frustrating and for both of us. Rick

Suhr Interview

kept saying, "If I can just have you healthy for eight weeks..." Then I'd get to about six weeks and something would happen. The celiac was diagnosed around June and we were able to deal with it and overcome it. Those mental struggles I was able to deal with and it made me stronger.

T&FN: Do the physical demands of the vault itself—sore legs from running, sore shoulders and

a long jump pit that was frozen. That problem never once involved pole vaulting. I'm sure vaulting doesn't help my back, but I never was injured from that.

Rick is very careful and understands about my body and how to take it easy. We are very careful about the surfaces we train on. We very rarely put any weight on my back, if at all. We know there are many different ways in training to get the same results without injury.

T&FN: There are seasons when you have been on a physical as well as emotional roller coaster. Does coping with that and being able to recover come mainly from Rick's support and your own strong beliefs? How do you do that?

Suhr: It comes a lot from Rick's support. There are things to worry and stress about, but you learn it's a waste of time to worry about how long you're going to be injured and when you're going to get healthy. You just trust your faith, pray that things are going to work out and will be better at the end.

That thought definitely helps in dealing with the setbacks, because they can be very emotional and disturbing. So we have gotten a lot better in situations like last year to pull together and making things better.

T&FN: You're now No. 2 all-time indoors and out and ranked No. 1 last year. You would certainly like to set a World Record at some point in your career, but after all you have achieved what remains the lure of the vault?

Suhr: I think it's just to jump as high as I possibly can. I don't pick meets or certain heights. Each year, I just try to jump as high as I possibly can. That's our goal and we feel we train for that and everything else will fall into place. Records and titles will come from that. Our goal is to jump as high as we can and that will put everything else in its place.

T&FN: Now the critical question—why did you change your hair color from last year's blonde back to black this winter?

Suhr [laughs]: One reason was, black is much easier to maintain when the roots grow back in and it's the natural color. And two, for the health

of my hair. One time I even had Rick try to color the roots, but that was a mistake. [Rick adds, "I was horrible."]

I don't know why I went for the blonde look. I had the idea and Rick actually talked me into it, so I thought I would give it a try. We wanted to see just how blonde I could go, so it took off. But eventually I got tired of it. □



ANDREW MACLIMANNAN/PHOTO RUN

Defying conventional wisdom, Suhr is now having more fun as a non-blonde

arms from jamming the pole into the box, sore back from landing—cause you any problems? Or has it been more the problems away from the event?

Suhr: When I look at the pole vault in general, it is a very abrupt event and it is harsh on the body. But most any injury I had came previously, from before I started vaulting. My back problem came from college and landing in



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