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Varsity Tuesday: How to ... Pole Vault

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It's the one event you can watch from anywhere on the track. It involves pointing your feet to the sky, then becoming inverted, before falling back to earth.

There's running, jumping and an elevated high bar involved.

And, best of all, a successful attempt usually is followed by gasps from near and far.

But it's not for everybody.

The pole vault is an acquired skill, where a few precious inches can make a season.

Most vaulters are strong in some areas and not in others. Or average across the board.

"I rarely get the top-level athletes out here," said Bozeman High pole vault coach Lath McLeod. "If they're super fast, they go to sprints. If they're super strong, they go to throws."

If they're short on wits, but big on thrill seeking, the vault is the perfect event.

"You gotta be kind of stupid to do pole vaulting," said Jim Umbaugh, Bozeman High's top vaulter.

Translation: Fearless.

"You have to not be afraid," Umbaugh explained. "You're running with a stick in your hand and you put it up in the box and hope that everything goes right."

There's a little more to it than that.

The pole vault, which may be the most technical of a track and field meet's 17 events, uses a mixture of speed, strength, agility and body awareness.

The smallest vaulters use 10-foot poles, the largest can get up to 15 feet. Weights vary too.

The heaviest poles have the most spring in them, and throws the vaulter farther.

After what can be a lengthy learning process - athletes must develop a trust that the pole won't snap or that landings will be safe - novices may improve their vaults by 1-2 feet.

But once the bar is set above 10 feet, an inch or two can seem like an enormous victory.

"You don't just come out and set the world on fire," said McLeod, who is in his 13th season as pole vault coach at BHS after competing on a scholarship at Southern Methodist University. "It's a four-year endeavor. We always run out of time."

Before any movement down the runway is made, McLeod shows newcomers how to hold the pole: Straight up before reaching as high as they can with their right hand (if they are right-handed).

Then they position the pole diagonally over their shoulder, and move their hand up another six inches.

The approach to the "box" - where the pole is planted - is used for both speed and foot placement. Once the pole is inserted into the box, right-handed vaulters must make their first leap with their left foot and keep to the right of the pole. (For lefties, the process is reversed).

Next comes the takeoff.

Then flight.

This is where a strong sense of adventure comes in to play.

"It's really, really nerve-wracking," said BHS senior Cree Howard, who recently tied the school record of 10 feet. (Female high school pole vaulting in Montana is less than a decade old). "But it's really exciting. There's a whole bunch of adrenaline rushing the whole time."

On the takeoff, the lead foot drives off the ground, which swings the trail leg up. During the swing phase, the trail leg comes through and inverts the body upside down.

The final step is the turn of the pole and the push off over the bar before the vaulter free-falls onto the plush landing mat.

Again, it takes time to learn.

Because of the high learning curve, most vaulters are one-event athletes.

While Howard also competes in the high jump, Brock Spain and Umbaugh concentrate solely on vaulting.

"There's so much to learn and there's so much to practice," said Umbaugh, whose personal best of 14-3 set on April 26 is three inches shy of Dustin Pitman's school mark set in 2001. "You have to practice every day. It's just you against the bar."

Umbaugh's competitive pole vaulting career began as a ninth grader - "I really didn't like running that much. I liked the pole vault, it looked more extreme than anything else," he said - and will end with the state meet later this month at Bozeman's Van Winkle Stadium.

He plans to study at Wyoming Tech in Laramie, but isn't planning on vaulting there. Howard is off to the University of California-Berkeley, where she may walk on.

When looking back, Howard, like most vaulters, had plenty of growing pains.

"You have no technique at all," she said. "And you're laying there on the mat just not knowing anything. It's really frustrating."

But when all goes right and technique is perfected, the feedback is instant.

"Pole vaulting gets the "ooooh" factor from the crowd," said McLeod, who is assisted by Steve Spain. "You don't get the "ooooh" from any other event."

And McLeod is in agreement with Umbaugh's assessment of what type of person takes up this event.

"When people ask me what they need to be a good pole vaulter," he said with a laugh, "I always say, 'stupidity and good health insurance.'"