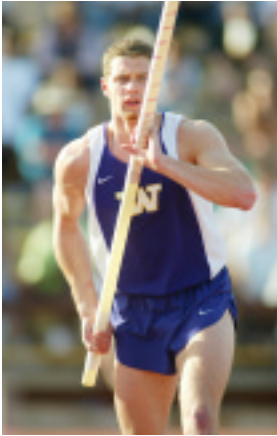


## Putting in the Work

### Marketing Major Vaults Toward a Chance at the Olympic Games

By Aaron Ragan-Fore



It took a combination of practice and peer pressure to carry Brad Walker over the pole-vault bar for the first time. “My eighth-grade classmates didn’t believe I could make the jump with the bar set at 9 feet,” remembers Walker. “One kid bet me five bucks that I couldn’t, so I went and cleared the bar for him.”

A decade later, Walker exhibits the same drive that took him

aloft in junior high school. He is a two-time NCAA indoor pole-vault champion and a four-time All-American, treading the line between athletic achievement and maintaining his 3.5 grade-point average as a senior Marketing major.

“I’ve had to prove myself numerous times,” he says, “but I do it the same way anybody with a 3.5 does it. I spend a lot of time in the weight room when I can’t run, and a lot of time running when I can’t lift weights. That attitude translates to schoolwork as well.”

Walker speaks in a straightforward, measured manner, reminiscent of the pole vault itself. He radiates the feeling that he won’t be sitting still for long, and that’s probably a good thing. Between his daily training schedule, a part-time high school coaching job, and a spring quarter sales internship, who has time to sit still? With another win at this spring’s NCAA Indoor Championships, Walker is now facing a new challenge. In July, he will travel to Sacramento to compete with the best vaulters in America for a position on the U.S. Olympic team.

“I’m sure that the pressure going into an NCAA meet is going to be absolutely nothing compared to going into the Olympic trials, because you have one opportunity to make it,” admits Walker. “But I don’t dwell on it. I think there’s a really good chance I could make the team, as long as I’m jumping the way I plan to.”

Husky pole vault coach Pat Licari agrees, adding that “Brad is in a group of six or eight guys who have a realistic shot at making the Olympic team. Brad has always managed his time very well. He really is an All-American in academics as well as in track.”

It hasn’t been easy for Walker to reach the level of athletic and academic success he is currently enjoying. His greatest setback came last spring, when an injury to his right hand

eliminated him from the last two weeks of the outdoor track season. Walker was in a cast and out of competition for 11 weeks, a devastating setback for a collegiate jumper whose star had been on the rise. “I had a really difficult summer,” Walker says of his injury. “I planned on graduating in the spring of 2003, and I was going to try to go jump in Europe and at the World Championships. Everything was shut down and taken away.”

Walker could have simply ended his college career, but instead he found another option. A junior year foot surgery had forced him to skip a season of indoor competition eligibility. Walker decided to delay his graduation by a year to take advantage of the holdover season.

He could have coasted through three quarters of easy classes while waiting for the season to start, but that’s not Walker’s way. He used his extra year in college as an academic opportunity. “I was half tempted to graduate with a general business degree,” he says, “but because of the injury I decided to come back for the undergraduate marketing option, as well as the elective sales certificate.”

Though Walker makes it look effortless, it can be difficult to find time for his training, classes and internship. There are a lot of late nights. “But that’s college life,” he adds. “I think that every student has stayed up until 2 a.m. at least once to write a paper. Just put in the work, and you’re going to get the results.”

That philosophy may have served Walker well as a college athlete, but training for the Olympic trials is putting him to the test.

“I’m in a different place than many other Olympic hopefuls, because I’m still a collegiate athlete,” he explains. “I still have to worry about both school and training. I still have to focus on getting good grades.”

The Olympic Games will be in Athens, Greece, this August and Walker speaks animatedly at the prospect of training with other Olympians on the island of Crete. Whether Walker spends his summer along the coast of the Mediterranean or the Pacific has yet to be decided, however, and through all the pressure he is keeping one eye on the horizon. “I don’t have any immediate aspirations right now other than just to keep jumping,” he says, “so I’ll definitely be looking for sponsorships after graduation.”

Keeping with his straightforward manner, Walker is realistic about his future. “It’s pretty likely that I won’t be able to survive off pole vaulting forever,” he says. “It’s my business degree that will support me for the rest of my life.”

