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*The Chautauqua Star*  
August 9, 2012

## Golden Girl: Suhr Wins Pole Vault

Four years of waiting for another chance all came down to standing and watching, just like the rest of us.

Yes, for a brief moment Monday afternoon, time stood still for Jenn Suhr. Soon after the Fredonia native failed on her last attempt at clearing 4.80 meters, Cuba's Yarisley Silva was next in line with one jump to solve everything.

If Silva were to clear 4.80, she was taking home the gold, leaving a disappointing silver for Suhr. If she didn't clear, Suhr would be the one taking home gold. But regardless of the jump, it was well known to be the last of the 2012 women's pole vault.

So you can understand Suhr's emotions when Silva nicked the bar, clinching an Olympic gold medal, and thus adding one more crucial piece to her dazzling resume.

Suhr, who took silver in the 2008 Olympics, redeemed herself Monday night by winning with a jump of 4.75 meters. Silva also cleared 4.75, but needed to clear 4.80 to defeat Suhr because she had more misses.

Thus, when Silva's final jump came up short, Suhr was officially crowned.

Interesting in the fact that Suhr's winning number this year was actually lower than that of her silver score in 2008. Part of that day probably had to do with the swirling winds of London, which offered less than ideal jumping situations.

But whatever it was, only Suhr, Silva and two-time defending Olympic champion and de facto archrival Yelena Isinbayeva could clear 4.70 meters. Isinbayeva, a Russian who is practically the Babe Ruth of women's pole vault, settled for bronze.

Significantly, Suhr beat Isinbayeva, who failed to become the first woman to win the same individual track and field event at three consecutive Olympics.

Though Isinbayeva has struggled since her last Olympic gold, Rick Suhr wouldn't listen to any of that.

Like so many in their pole vaulting world, the Suhrs have long considered Isinbayeva the gold standard. After his wife finally beat the Russian, Rick compared Jenn to wrestler Rulon Gardner – who defeated the undefeated Alexander Karelin in 2000 – and himself to Herb Brooks, who coached the 1980 Olympic Hockey team to its shocking win over the Russians and eventual gold.

“It’s such a big upset, I don’t think people realize how big it actually is,” Rick Suhr said. And yet, for the U.S. track team, it only moves the scoreboard up by one notch. Suhr’s was a surprise gold for the Americans when they couldn’t catch a break anywhere else.

Two-time Olympic gold medalist Angelo Taylor staggered to the finish in the men’s 400-meter hurdles for fifth place in a race won by 34-year-old Felix Sanchez of the Dominican Republic. Sanchez finished in 47.63 to beat American Michael Tinsley to the line, as the United States took only one medal in an event where it captured all three in Beijing.

It’s a new day, it’s a new era,” said the 33-year-old Taylor. “Things change. People evolve. People show up.”

Americans Allyson Felix and Carmelita Jeter, Jamaican 100-meter gold medalist Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and 400-meter winner Sanya Richards-Ross of the U.S. also made it through. Richards-Ross had the best time of the bunch at 22.48 seconds after a restless four or five hours of sleep the night before with her new gold medal.

“I just feel lighter and free and so I’m just going to go out there and give it my best and hopefully make it through the semifinals as well,” she said.

While Richards-Ross was expected to win in the 400, Suhr wasn’t really the favorite. She’s been through a lot the last four years – namely, an Achilles injury, a gluten allergy that has caused sometime-debilitating sickness and, of course, the always-hovering presence of Isinbayeva, who despite her recent struggles still has a lot of her competition cowed before they ever step into the stadium.

It felt that way for Suhr – then Jenn Stuczynski – in Beijing, where the cameras caught Rick berating her minutes after she finished second. Lost in that snippet was the relationship that developed as he became more to her than a coach.

“If he could get out there and try to push me over the bar, he would,” Suhr said. “He’s done so much for me. He cares so much. People are like, ‘Your coach is intense.’ It’s because he has that passion and knows how much I want it. It’s two people with that kind of passion and drive.”

Maybe their practice facility tells their story best – a cold, unforgiving, shell of a place that hardly looks like the training center for an Olympic champion.

“It’s uphill, a slanted box, a lot of messed-up stuff,” Suhr said.

As time has passed, Rick Suhr has had to keep expanding it. Upward. Because his wife’s jumps threaten to scrape the roof.

And yet, rough as those conditions can be, Rick Suhr said it was worse at the stadium in London, where the pole vaulters were met with drizzle, rain, shifting winds.

Before all of Suhr's jumps, she would look to the stands where her husband would be holding his arms straight out in one direction or the other, signaling Jenn to make certain pole adjustments depending on the wind.

"You can see the way it goes back and forth," Suhr said of the constant conversation she carries on with her husband during a meet. "We're talking. We're emotional. It's something we put our hearts into, and blood, sweat and tears. "It's two people," she said, "working toward one goal."