

Ken Flax 'towers' above his competition



Photo by Kirk Hirota

Ken Flax is Oregon's second best hammer thrower in school history.

By John Healy
Of the Emerald

Mention the hammer throw, and visions of 6-foot-7, 270-pound behemoths dance through the mind. Guys big enough to play defensive tackle in professional football, right?

Not in the case of Oregon's Ken Flax.

Flax is a guy who played tailback and defensive back on his high school football team. He stands a mere 5-11, and weighs in at a "feather-light" 214 pounds.

But in the last five months, Flax has vaulted into a spot as one of the nation's best collegiate hammer throwers, good enough to be picked to finish seventh at the NCAA championships in Eugene in late May.

Even more amazingly, he is the top-ranked American-born discus thrower on the collegiate scene today.

All this from a guy who didn't pick up a hammer ball-and-chain until he arrived at Oregon last fall as a freshman.

"When I came up here my

senior year in high school, Ray Burton (former Oregon weight coach) said I would probably be more of a hammer thrower in college," recalls Flax, who limited himself to the shot put and discus in high school.

"And Gary Wolf, who used to be the Oregon record holder in the discus, told me 'If you are going to a major college, you'll be competing against guys who are 260 and 6-7 in the shot and discus,'" says Flax.

So Flax turned to the hammer, which requires a blend of technique and speed rather than sheer strength, according to Flax.

"The main thing is speed in the hammer," explains Flax. "You can be too strong. For instance, this West German hammer thrower increased his back squat by 100 pounds, but he only increased his hammer throw by a quarter inch.

"There are a lot of guys who are big and strong, but they can't feel what they are doing," he says.

Flax can identify with that problem, because last year the emphasis in his training was to "get big and massive" through extensive bodybuilding workouts.

But when Oregon hired a new weight event coach last fall, Flax was exposed to a totally different coaching philosophy. Although the new coach, Stewart Togher, is a former Scottish weightlifting champion, he stressed to Flax that versatility was the key to success in the world of hammer throwing.

So instead of having Flax just throw the hammer in competition and work out constantly on the weights, Flax says Togher had him throwing the hammer, shot and discus in every dual meet and working out constantly in practice to perfect his throwing technique and his speed.

The new regimen seems to work, since Flax has improved his best in the hammer from 210-7 at the end of last spring to 222-5 this spring. And he has also improved markedly in both the shot and discus.

Flax stayed away from the hammer in the Pepsi Relays and the Twilight Meet the last two weekends, mainly because he says he was "burned out" by almost two months of weekly competition.

But Flax says the heavy competitive load was planned that way, with him peaking twice during the season, once in the dual meet season and then again during the Pac-10 and NCAA competitions.

"You peak once early in the duals to get yourself qualified for whatever you're working for," says Flax. "Then you get back to the weights and get stronger again. When you're not peaking, you spend as much time lifting as you do throwing. But when you work toward a peak, your ratio is 3 to 1, throwing to lifting."

Flax's first test of that peak will be at noon on Friday in Pullman, Wash., when he faces Stanford's Shaun Pickering (225-1) in a showdown for the Pac-10 hammer title. Pickering edged Flax last spring in the conference final — third place to fourth place, respectively — and is picked one place ahead of Flax at the NCAA meet by Track and Field News.

After that, it is the NCAA championships in Eugene, where Flax feels only two throwers — Fresno State's Matt Mileham and San Jose State's Kjell Bystedt — are out of his range.

"But anything can happen," says Flax. "If you connect on one and the other guy has a bad day, you can win."

Has Oilers' time come?

EDMONTON, Alberta — The Edmonton Oilers have the potential to blow hockey teams off the ice with their impressive offensive arsenal. But they didn't show it in last season's Stanley Cup final series against the New York Islanders, when they were eliminated in four straight games, nor in the first two games of this year's finals.

They finally broke loose in Game 3 Tuesday night.

Now, after erupting for a 7-2 victory and a 2-1 lead in the best-of-seven National Hockey League series, the Oilers feel like they're on a roll. Game 4 will be played in the Northlands Coliseum Thursday night.

"It was a case of everyone reaching their potential, playing

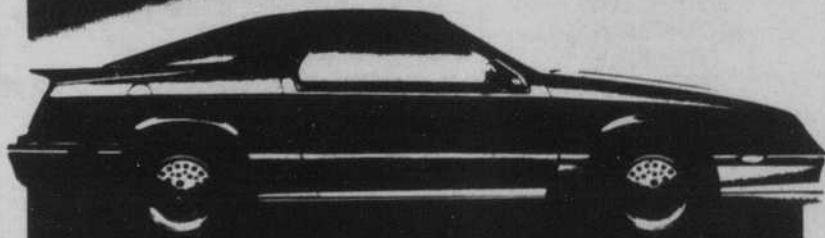
up to their potential," said Mark Messier, who led the assault on goalie Billy Smith with two goals. "We knew we had to score some goals, but it didn't matter who did it. We knew we had to play as well as we can, which we weren't doing.

"We had that second and third effort. We've got to have it. The pressure was on us and we showed we can handle it."

And they've shown they can handle the Islanders, who are seeking their fifth straight Stanley Cup. If the Oilers win the next two games — Game 5 is here Saturday night — they will shatter the Isles' dreams of tying the NHL record of five consecutive titles, set by the Montreal Canadiens from 1956-60.

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