

Oregon's Flax has the tools to be a champion

By **Jasen Emmons**
Of the Emerald

With two throws remaining in the hammer competition of last year's Pac-10 track and field championships, defending champion Ken Flax was second. His best throw of 238 feet was two and a half feet behind Washington State University's Tore Gustafsson, the 1982 and '83 champion.

Flax entered the circle for his fifth throw working for one technical point that had eluded him in his four previous throws. He threw 237-1, but felt what had been missing and told himself, "Okay, that's it. All I have to do is this one thing."

Gustafsson, in another flight of competition, threw 243 on his fifth toss, increasing his lead over Flax to five feet.

Flax went to the circle for his final throw. "I've never been in deeper concentration," he says. "I just went and did the one technical point that I was working on. It went. I'd fallen down in the circle. I didn't know that I knew that it was a pretty good throw."

It flew 243-8, the farthest throw ever by an American-born collegian and eight inches farther than Gustafsson's best throw of the day. Gustafsson, however, had one throw left. He fouled. Flax had his second Pac-10 title.

Two weeks later at the NCAA championships, Gustafsson's first throw went 246-10. Flax threw 244-5 on his fifth throw, a personal best, and put himself in a position to win or lose on his final throw. He could do no better and ended up third.

Flax is still frustrated by his final throw at the NCAA meet. He prides himself on being a fierce competitor above all else and thrives on having to win on his fifth or sixth throws. That he was not able to do so in the most important meet of the year has been a great motivating factor ever since. His main objective this year is the win the NCAA championship.

"I just have to shoot for NCs," he says. "That's really all I'm really concerned about. Anything else is just secondary. It might not be good to put so much pressure on one meet, but that's the only chance I've got. And it would be good. Oregon's never had an NC champion (in the hammer). And I wouldn't mind being the first."

To do so Flax must again face Gustafsson, a Swede in his final year at WSU. Their first encounter this season in the WSU dual meet ended with Gustafsson throwing 244-1 to Flax's 243-9. Flax, however, had been bothered by a pulled abdominal muscle for two weeks before the meet and had only thrown 18 times in practice when 150 weekly throws is typical.

To come so close to upsetting Gustafsson, who has thrown 250-4 this season, after little throwing practice was encouraging. Despite beating Gustafsson in the Pac-10s and being ranked the number two American hammer thrower for 1985 by Track and Field News, Flax considers himself the underdog whenever the two compete.

"I would be the returning champion for Pac-10s,



Ken Flax

but I think he would have to be a slight favorite," Flax says. "He's thrown eight feet farther than I have this year, and his lifetime best is still almost seven feet farther. He would just have to be a favorite."

Flax is well aware of the advantages of being the underdog.

"It's a position I prefer," he says. "I guess I've been an underdog in a lot of the bigger meets. That's great because it takes a lot of pressure off you. It's not like you have to do this. It's always nice to go out and surprise people."

Flax has been surprising a lot of people by the speed at which he has become one of America's top hammer throwers. He had never thrown a hammer before walking on to the Oregon track team five years ago. Coming out of high school, he knew that he was too small to throw the shot put and discus or play Pac-10 football.

So when a family friend suggested Flax try the hammer, he thought it was a good idea. Within five months he had broken the freshmen school record and won Junior Nationals. Last summer he progressed to third at the NCAAs and TACs, before placing seventh at the World University Games.

Flax's size may be another reason he loves the underdog role. By weightmen's standards he is considered small at 5-foot-10, 215 pounds. He has a 32-inch waist, 30-inch thighs and must buy 36-inch Levis to fit over them. Compared to Gustafsson, who is 5-foot-11, 240 pounds, or Jud Logan, the 6-foot-4, 268-pound American record holder in the hammer, Flax is small. Both Gustafsson and Logan are considerably stronger than Flax, Logan being 50 percent stronger than Flax in all his weight lifts.

"There's just no doubt the man is an animal," Flax

says of Logan. "He's just completely barbaric when it comes to lifting weights. But as far as technique and speed in the circle, I guess I have him. He's got longer arms, more weight to counter the ball with, all the strength in the world to throw far, and yet he was only nine feet ahead of me last year. Which really isn't that far."

What Flax lacks in size and strength he more than makes up for with speed and technique. Rather than worrying about how much he can benchpress, squat or clean, Flax and his coach, Stewart Togher, concentrate on how his strength can be applied to the hammer. They emphasize specific strength and efficient technique to throw far. Which means Flax, as a hammer thrower, will do different lifts than a discus thrower or shot putter.

Togher believes Flax's size is not as important as many people have claimed it to be.

"The size is not a factor yet," he says. "Until we start throwing 80 meters (262-5). It's an event where there are many sizes. If you're quick you can be small."

This week has been the first since Flax pulled his abdominals that he has been able to train and throw normally. He will throw Saturday in the dual meet against California and then fly to Los Angeles to compete Sunday in the Mount Sac Relays against Logan and a slew of other top Americans.

"The most important thing is the dual meet," Flax says. "If we win the dual meet we're dual-meet champions. I've never been a part of that."

As to the competition at Mt. Sac, Flax says, "Everybody will be there. I guarantee you'll see the American record (Logan's 256-3) go."

Flax is not concerned about whether he can throw that far.

"People always say, 'How far are you going to throw this year?' I say between 100 feet and 300 feet because you never know what can happen. You can always throw bad and never throw far again, or you could just go crazy and make a breakthrough and throw really far. I try to concentrate on what it takes to throw far instead of the distance. Whatever it takes to win."

Sports Shorts

The Oregon gymnastics team has signed two high school athletes to letters-of-intent. Duck coach Ed Boyd announced Thursday.

Jenni Macalutas, a native of Aiea, Hawaii, and Celeste Garcia of West Linn, Ore. revealed their intentions to come to Oregon to join Eugene's Dawna Wilson as high school seniors who have committed to the Ducks this season.

The Ducks are coming off impressive year in which they finished with their best record ever at 19-11. They beat several top-twenty teams and sent individual performer Nicky Eden to NCAAs, the first time an Oregon performer has been to nationals.

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