

Capping the Deal

■ Saturday is the last Pre Classic for a man who has resurrected an art that Americans can be proud of

By Jeff Smith
Oregon Daily Emerald

The college athlete approached the respected coach and presented him with a polite request.

"If I came here to live, would you coach me?" the soon-to-be college graduate asked.

The thought that somebody would actually want to throw the hammer impressed and somewhat amazed the coach.

"If a guy is willing to pack his bag and travel [to Eugene], then you certainly can't turn that down," the coach said. "Especially if he wanted to throw."

With that, the deal was complete.

Since that day back in 1984, the college student has grown up into the top hammer thrower in the nation — not to mention a silver medalist in the '96 Olympics.

And the coach has further gained respect as an international expert on the hammer. Lance Deal and Stewart Togher. Athlete and coach.

Two men who through their joint effort have helped make Americans competitive on the collegiate, national and international spectrums in an event that is dominated by foreigners, particularly Europeans.

Under Togher's guidance, Deal has mastered the forms and methods of the hammer throw, which Togher says is so much more crucial than just using pure strength.

"I don't care about how far he throws," said the Edinburgh, Scotland, native who came to America in October 1983 to work with former Oregon men's track coach Bill Dellinger. "I'm much more interested in the mastery of technique."

Deal's near perfect throws will be on display Saturday morning at 11:15 a.m. in the

26th annual Prefontaine Classic Grand Prix at Hayward Field.

The Pre event is always special for the Eugene resident, but this one carries extra significance for obvious reasons.

It will be his last.

Not only will his Saturday morning throws mark his final Pre Classic, but the competition will also signify the end to his days on the legendary Hayward Field.

"I'm trying not to think too much about that," said Deal, who has said he will retire in September, after the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia. "I still have a lot of work to do this year. But I admit, it will be tough to leave."

Deal will certainly end his Hayward days against competition worthy of the Olympics themselves. In fact, the hammer thrower who beat Deal by a mere four inches at the 1996 Games in Atlanta will be on hand. Hungarian Balazs Kiss will be one of the favorites in a field that will feature four of the top 10 hammer throwers in the world.

"Usually a lot of the foreigners don't like to travel into the U.S., but they do for the Pre because the competition is so great," Deal said. "It's really a credit to Hayward Field and the city of Eugene."

And perhaps also to a certain thrower and his coach for raising the bar of hammer throwing in America.

●●●

Throwing the hammer in the Olympics wasn't quite the childhood dream that motivated Deal while growing up in Casper, Wyo.

"Oh, you know, like all American boys I had the dream of being a football player," said Deal, who was an All-American linebacker/offensive tackle in high school. "But then when I graduated I turned my focus to the discus."

He attended Montana State at Bozeman and appeared to be on his way to a lengthy discus career. He captured the USA Junior Title and won the gold at the Pan-American Junior Championships.

But in the same summer as his triumphs something happened that changed his life forever.

One day, while he was working at a hardware store, something unusual caught his eye.

"There was this hammer hanging on the wall and I was interested in it," Deal said. "I started playing around with it and ended up buying it for six bucks."

He immediately contacted 1972 Olympian Tom Gage, who gave him his first pointers. Deal continued to throw the discus, but was realizing that his passion was elsewhere. Once he graduated from college, he decided to dedicate his time to the hammer.

It would be the start of a beautiful friendship.

●●●

Kevin McMahon was nervous.

He was about to dial the phone number of Lance Deal and wasn't quite sure how he would be received.

After all, why would the country's top hammer thrower want to waste his time talking to a measly college student from Georgetown?

"I was getting so addicted to hammer throwing that I wanted to know all about it," said

McMahon, who graduated from college in 1995. "I knew it might be a long shot, but I just had to give Lance a call."

Much to his surprise, Deal was more than willing to answer any questions, just as Gage had done for him years before.

McMahon wasn't hesitant and began asking him questions that ranged from, "How many hours of training do you do in a day?" to "What do you eat on the day of an event?"

"These were all things that I was dying to know," McMahon said. "And Lance was great about it. For me, it was like being a football player and just calling up Joe Montana."

Deal's tips have obviously been used wisely. McMahon is now one of the top throwers in the country.

The two have been competing against each other for the last four years, and share a common respect for one another.

"I tell ya, he's fun to watch,"

Deal said. "He's getting overlooked this year because of all of the success of the foreigners, but he can perform. He's small for the hammer and is just a whirling dervish."

"Lance is a great role model," McMahon said. "It's so admirable the way he handles himself. I never feel like I'm throwing against him, but rather I'm throwing with him. And that's a big compliment to the type of person he is."

McMahon goes on to mention how he'll always hear Deal cheering on the other athletes that are in his same event.

"You don't know how rare that is these days," McMahon said.

The youngster may have the utmost respect for his elder, but that doesn't mean he's shy when it comes to cracking a joke about him.

McMahon busts out in a hearty laugh when asked what separates Deal from the rest of the throwers.

"His enormously large quads!" McMahon exclaimed. "He'll get a kick out of that one. He's got some of the biggest legs you'll ever see. Sometimes I call him 'Quadzilla.'"

The laughter finally comes to a halt, and deep admiration is heard through his voice.

"It's just his system that he has for himself," McMahon said. "He's got a strong mind, a strong body and a great support group. It all fits."

"I can't imagine the world of hammer throwing without Lance Deal in it."

●●●

As Nancy Deal talks of her husband's courageous career, a loud grunt is heard in the background.

"What was that?" she is asked.

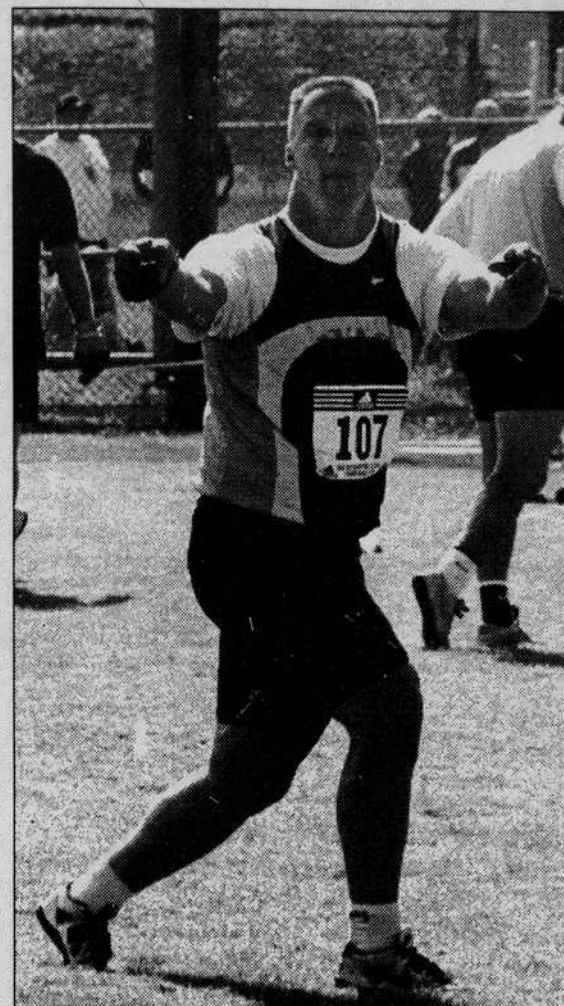
"Oh, that's just Lance," Nancy replies. "His hip is bothering him."

Indeed, there are signs that maybe a retirement from the sport would do some good to the 38-year-old's body. In 1997 he was forced to miss the entire season due to a bulging disc in his back, and the very next year he suffered a broken right foot.

There were thoughts that maybe that was the end. But Deal bounced back and had a strong 1999 season in preparation for the big Olympic year.

Still, Nancy admits, there probably is a spot deep down in her partner's heart that is looking forward to resting.

"I think we're both looking forward to the morning where he wakes up and some-



Emerald archive

Lance Deal took first place at last year's U.S.A. Track and Field Championships at Hayward Field with a throw of 263 feet, 7 inches.

thing's not hurting," she said.

Life without the hammer would certainly be an adjustment for Deal, but Nancy also points out that it would be a huge change in her life as well.

"I've never known him when he wasn't an athlete," she said. "But there's still so many great things ahead. But I do tease him that now he's going to have to find a 'real job' where he works 9-to-5."

●●●

It all came down to the final throw on that fateful day in Atlanta in 1996. Deal was representing his country in its own backyard during the Olympics.

He nearly didn't advance past the first three rounds. Luckily, he was the beneficiary of a rule book consultation and was allowed to continue.

He would have three throws, and the first two did no damage. But on his final one he unleashed the hammer 266 feet, 2 inches to capture the silver.

One would imagine the nerves would be at full throttle with the entire country watching, but Deal had other things on his mind.

"I was a little less worried about the nation than I was my wife," Deal said between chuckles. "My goal for this year is simply to throw far early and avoid the suspense."

Not making matters any easier will be the pressure of performing in front his two biggest fans: Nancy and their 7-year-old daughter Sarah, who will both be in Sydney.

●●●

Coach Togher looks back fondly at the path he and his star pupil have taken to get to where they are today.

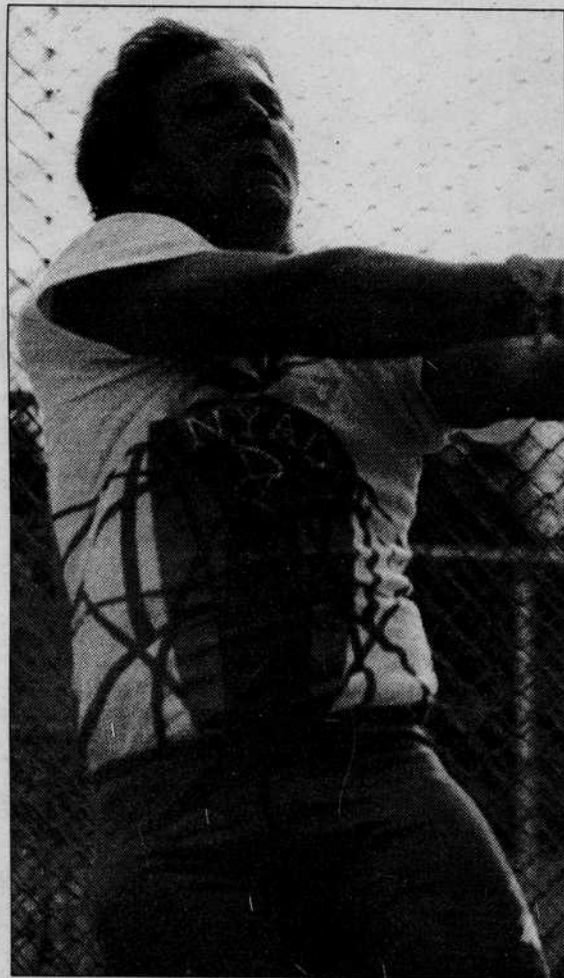
"When I came into the country there was not a single American in the top 50 in the event," Togher said. "My challenge was to produce someone to bring the sport back to its feet, and Lance was that guy."

"He stayed the course, and it took years and years of hard work and dedication. But here he is."

Yes, he is. On the verge of retirement, but also on the verge of perhaps an Olympic gold medal.

"Instead of looking back right now, I'm deciding to look forward," Deal said.

And instead of sleeping in on Saturday, it would be wise to make your way to the epic hammer ring on the south side of Hayward Field by 11:15 a.m. so you can have your chance to say goodbye to a leg-



Emerald archive

A younger-looking Lance Deal competes in the 1994 Pre Classic.