

Venezuelan star flies at Clackamas

Greg Stoltz

The Clackamas Print

Venezuelan pole-vaulter Keisa Monterola came to Clackamas Community College this term to clear two bars: surpassing her record jump of 14 feet 1 inch, and passing the English proficiency test for admission to the University of Washington.

Monterola, 21, who is a member of her country's national team, wanted to train in the U.S. because of the lack of competition and coaching available in Venezuela.

Able to regularly vault 13 feet, while other Venezuelan women are only clearing heights of around 11 feet 10 inches, the competition at home isn't even close.

Limited coaching had also been holding Monterola back.

She set her personal record height of 14-1 1/4 back in 2005. Clackamas head track coach Keoni McHone said she hasn't had regular coaching or training facilities since then. He said the only coaching she receives is what the national team provides for a couple weeks before each event.

Monterola said, "I didn't have a coach last year. I was training by myself, so it was complicated to make the mark to qualify to the (Olympic) competition."

After working for three years to make the necessary contacts to come to the U.S. to train, Monterola visited the University of Washington in early 2008. There for three months, Monterola said, "I wasn't a student yet, I just was studying English and getting some practice knowing the team and that's it."

Washington vault coach Pat Licari offered Monterola a full scholarship. However, she was unable to pass the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) requirement for admission, and she had to return home.

Studying English in Venezuela wasn't easy.

Monterola said, "In Venezuela, it's

very difficult to be an athlete and student at the same time. You have to be a student or an athlete. You cannot be both."

McHone explained, "They don't do sports through the colleges like we do in the U.S." He said all sports are done privately with what they call "clubs".

Sure enough, athletics and academics did not mix for Monterola.

She said she could never finish a complete term or course in English because of travel for competition. When asked to guess how many times she started an English course, she laughed and said, "Many times."

It was coach Licari who recommended Monterola come to Oregon. Here she could study English and train with CCC vaulting coach Rick Baggett, who had been Licari's high school and junior college coach.

Monterola got to Clackamas for the start of spring term. More than a month into the track season, McHone said visa difficulties were responsible for her late arrival. He added that the original intent was for her to start here in January.

Asked about Monterola's return to her best vault height, Baggett said, "She's got to develop a little more speed and a little more core strength."

He said those two things will put her above her record of 14-1, likely in the range of 14-5 to 14-9.

Baggett said, "She's probably one of the best technicians I've ever seen. And, I've seen everyone."

McHone said Monterola has really benefited from college experience and being on a college track and field team. He said, "She has come in here with what a lot of people would consider a lot of pressure. But, she is having just as much fun as any other athlete on the team."

Struck with occasional homesickness, Monterola said the time she spent in Seattle makes being here easier.

"Last year it was very hard," said Monterola. "I wanted to go back to my home. I'd say I don't want to stay here. I study in Venezuela. But, then I say I have three years waiting to come here and study at the university had to keep trying."

Her English has gotten a lot better, Baggett. Even though she has only been here a few weeks, he said she is already able to give him more feedback during training.

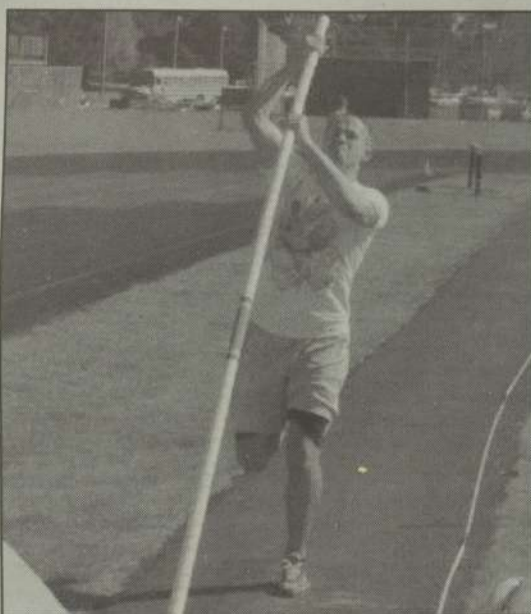
Monterola said she thinks this will be her only year at Clackamas. When asked if she would be ready to take her English test at the end of the year, she said, "Yeah, I think so. And, I'm so excited to do it." After that, she said she will head to University of Washington.

She is hoping to go to the 2012 Olympics in London. "Yeah, I'm excited because I'm working with Rick," said Monterola. "I feel like I'm going to be really fast, and I'm going to be with Pat who's a great coach. And, I know I'm going to get what I need to, (to) be at the Olympics."



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Las Vegas native thrives on Clackamas track team



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Josh Lair sets up to vault at a practice.

Kayla Calloway

Sports Editor

Clackamas is home to students from all over the Northwest. It's common to see someone who commutes from Molalla or sometimes from North Portland. However, it's not every day that one hears of a student from Las Vegas.

Josh Lair chose to leave his family and hometown of Las Vegas, Nev. to attend Clackamas this year, and although he misses his family a lot, he's happy with the change.

"There was really no track school in Vegas," said Lair. "And I really wanted to experience life on my own."

Still, Nevada to Oregon seems like a pretty big leap especially for someone as young as Lair, an 18-year-old freshman. It seems only obvious for there to be some motivating factor that made the journey worth-while. Running track was that factor.

"My senior year was my first," said Lair when

asked how long he had been involved with track and field.

Such a short amount of time, but it was all that was needed.

Coming from Vegas to Clackamas meant adjusting to the climate here, which for some can be challenging.

"I love it (here). I love the green," said Lair. "It's easier to breathe."

A universal desire when making a journey is no matter the distance, whether just a quick drive into town for a burger or a trip cross-country, the desire to feel as though it was worth it. Did that burger hit the right spot? In Lair's case, was the track season what he anticipated?

"It's alright," he said. "(The season) could be better."

Lair is looking forward to the rest of the season and possibly next year.

"I might be back next year, or join the coaching staff. One or the other," said Lair.