

“Chasing the Dream”

A speech delivered by Martin Bingisser to the Bellevue Overlake Rotary Club on 11 November 2009

Sometimes chasing a dream can take you to some interesting places. Inevitably, you'll begin to ask yourself what you are doing there. It happens to everyone. For me, it happened this summer while I was sitting alone in my hotel room in remote Bjelolasica, Croatia. I know you've probably heard of it, but for those that haven't, Bjelolasica is in a dark rural valley. You drive an hour past civilization on a long windy road through forest and mountains to get there. Once you arrive, the hotel has few amenities and lacked the one thing that I could have used the most for my three week stay: a washing machine. Instead, there was just a small shop selling candy bars and Croatian magazines. For entertainment, they provided us with a ping pong table. With few English speakers, no internet, no English TV, and no outgoing phone calls, I felt very isolated and began to wonder “what am I doing here?”

I bet you're asking the same question now, what was I doing there? There are two answers to this question. The short answer is that I was there to train. I am a track and field athlete. I compete in the hammer throw and Bjelolasica is the Croatian Olympic training. I was there for a training camp between competitions with Olympic champion Primoz Kozmus.

But saying I was there to train rather begs the question. There are numerous places on earth where I could train. Why Bjelolasica? Why choose this remote location with antiquated equipment over the plush athletic amenities available at nearly every university in America? And furthermore, why travel all that way just to train? Rather than going to Croatia and visiting the beaches as most people do, I managed to find the most remote spot in the country, only to throw hammers into an old pasture with livestock wandering dangerously close to the landing area. But whenever the question entered my head, I just had to look over at Primoz to be reminded that I was there chasing a dream: the Olympic dream.

Now you're probably all just wondering, what the heck is the hammer throw? Before I go on, let me tell you what it is and isn't. It isn't a competition to see who can throw a carpenter's hammer the furthest. That would be far too simple. Instead it's an obscure track and field event where we grab a four-foot long, sixteen pound implement by two hands, swing it around, and launch it nearly the length of a football field.

Despite its hard exterior, the hammer throw is actually quite complex, arguably the most technical track and field event. It can be quite difficult to iron out the minutia of the technique, but what can make it frustrating is that technique alone will not get results. It also a slew of factors like speed, strength, power, agility, and flexibility that all combine to form a thing of beauty. It is somewhat akin to a linebacker turning with the balletic grace and the explosiveness of a boxer. This complexity is what intrigues me and drives most hammer throwers; and when an athlete has drive, they grab on to the Olympic dream...the dream to compete at the highest level in their sport.

Before I grabbed on to the dream, I was on a fast track to nowhere. I had no motivation, no passion, and no drive. Today I'm following that dream towards Olympic glory and I've started

the Evergreen Athletic Fund, a non-profit organization that is encouraging others to chase the dream as well. The dream turned me around and gave me direction in life. It has been my driving force and it was the Olympic dream that led me to Croatia.

But now I'm getting ahead of myself. The dream first took control of my life 8 years ago, when I was attending Interlake High School here in Bellevue. After seeing me now, I'm certain you wouldn't have recognized me then. I probably called myself chubby or big-boned, but that would have been a lie. I was fat, tipping the scales at 300 pounds. I was also depressed, had no ambition and was headed nowhere in life. I approached school like I it was television show, tuning in and out when I wanted. As the end of high school neared, I tuned out more often than not and had just failed an English class needed to graduate. While I also played football and track, I never showed the promise of being a collegiate athlete in either. To make matters worse, I didn't even see how big of a hole I had dug myself into. I could barely envision what was going to happen the next day, let alone look into the future and see what path I had put my life on.

That changed during my senior year when I found the dream. I had picked the hammer up a few times before, but never had a coach or anything more than a passing interest in the event. But enter Harold Connolly, the last American to win the gold medal in the event. He came to town to conduct a clinic as part of his crusade to ensure that another American reaches the Olympic podium before he passes. His is no easy task. You see, Harold won his gold back in 1956 and the country has been in a drought ever since. When he came to Seattle he had just turned 70 and knew he would not have forever to see his newest dream fulfilled.

When I heard Connolly was coming to town, I jumped at the opportunity to host him at my parent's house. After the weekend, he had me falling head over heels for the hammer. He gave me private coaching every day before and after his clinics. He took video of my throws and we would analyze it together, pointing out what I could do to improve. We stayed up late talking about the event and how it had shaped his life. Harold loved that the complexity of the hammer throw made it the great equalizer for him, with success open to anyone willing to work hard enough. Harold had sustained nerve damage to his left arm at birth, an injury that left him with only one good arm. But it also left him with a dream to compete with everyone else despite his physical disadvantage. He realized that dream when he won the gold medal in the hammer throw, a *two*-handed event. This was all the motivation I needed. And as we parted ways, Harold reminded me that if I were to reach the next level, there were a few things I needed to do before I could chase the dream: get in shape and raise my grades. While hammer throwers can be big, they are never fat, and they need to go to college since that is where the American track and field system develops its athletes.

Fast-forward nine months from Connolly's visit to high school graduation and I had made a lot of progress. I dropped sixty pounds and was in better shape than ever. I was happy, I was motivated, and I was living the dream. But not everything was going to plan: I sat alone as my friends walked up to get their diplomas ... while I had raise my grades, that failed English class came back to haunt me and prevented me from graduating with them. It was a low point for me; I could see all the progress I had made but I also saw how far I still had to go. The old me would have given up then and fallen back into a depression, but the new me was different. I was

motivated and enrolled in summer school to finish my diploma. By the end of summer, I had my degree and was headed to college.

Now fast forward another six years: rather than being behind my friends, I was ahead of them. I had finished both my bachelor's degree and law school, both with honors, while many of my friends were still wrapping up college. I also completed a master's degree in tax law and passed the bar exam. And if that wasn't enough, I had just as much success athletically too. I was an All-American, a conference champion, and nearly broke UW's school record.

While this whole time the Olympics remained my long-term goal, it wasn't until I had this success that I really believed the goal was achievable. The goal was always out in the distance, and as I approached it, it came into focus for me. I knew I could be good, but my success caught me by surprise and convinced me I could be great.

Up until I graduated from law school last year, I had been able to manage both the demands of school and my commitment to athletics. But after graduation, I realized this balancing act would no longer be possible. I was forced to choose only one of the two to continue with. If I were to choose to pursue a legal career, I would not have sufficient time and energy to train. If I were to choose to truly dedicate myself to reaching the Olympics, I wouldn't have the time required for a full-time job. Something had to give, and the decision was tough: it was Olympic glory versus courtroom glory. Physical challenges versus intellectual challenges. It was even muscle shirts versus dress shirts. I also had to weigh the negatives of each: for example, the repetitiveness of taking thousands of throwing attempts versus the monotony of reviewing documents or sore muscles from weightlifting versus back pain from hunching over a computer for hours on end. In the end, the Olympic dream was too strong and I decided to put my legal dreams on hold to chase it since the Olympic dream is one dream I must pursue now or never.

When I started law school, I had envisioned my desk being in one of Seattle's high rises or perhaps out east in New York City. Unfortunately, the only thing I correctly envisioned was the eight-volume collection of the tax code on my bookshelf, and now it sits lonely in an unfamiliar daylight basement apartment in rural British Columbia. As you can guess, the dream led to there, just like it led me to Croatia. And this time I was yet again in search of a gold medalist.

To guide me to the next level, I was searching for someone who had been there before. I found that person in retired gold medalist Dr. Anatoli Bondarchuk. Dr. B, as we call him, is a character. He walks with a limp due to a lingering hip injury, sports a thick accent and has an English vocabulary that would likely fit on a single sheet of paper. He had won a gold medal for the Soviet Union before going on to coach numerous medalists and world record holders as their national coach. He was lured to Kuwait by a plush job after the Soviet Union fell, but the insufferable heat, along with the lack of vodka, tested his patience and led him to start a transition towards retirement by taking a low-key job in Kamloops, British Columbia. I figured if I was going to reach my dream, he would be the one to take me there and now I spend five hours a day working with him. He is my Mr. Miyagi; I do what he says, no questions asked. Granted, it can be hard to understand what he says sometimes, as many practices have more elements of sign language than spoken words, but I am training harder than I ever have and continue to progress.

With Dr. B's guidance, my life continues to be driven by the Olympic dream to this day. I am not a confident young man, with many successes, all of which I attribute to the hammer throw and the motivation I got from it. If not for the hammer throw, I can assure you I would not be standing here today speaking to you. I might have still graduated from college, but I would not have been a lawyer or had anywhere near the success I have had in the past eight years. Some kids need a spark to wake them up, and for me, the spark was the Olympic Dream.

My story is not unique. Just in the world of hammer throwing, I know of others who have had their lives turned around by the Olympic Dream. This summer I learned about a kid from Sacramento named Jared Turner. Jared flunked out of high school after trouble at home. During his senior year he signed up for independent study to finish his degree, but that made him ineligible for high school sports. He felt isolated without normal classes or a team to be around until his high school track coach introduced him to the hammer throw, a sport he could compete in since it wasn't an official high school event. The sport motivated him and this past year he maintained a 4.0 grade point average.

Stories like this are all over the place, especially in the throwing events. Unlike football and baseball, millions of kids don't throw heavy things for fun, and that creates an opportunity for anyone willing to work hard. The hammer throw, my event, is only an official high school sport in one state: tiny Rhode Island. The javelin is only an official sport in about a dozen states. Even the discus is not normally contested in many major cities since there isn't much grass to throw onto. Even where the events are contested, coaching can be hard to find, and without a good coach, it can be difficult for kids to get the motivation they need to reach their potential.

With this in mind, I began the Evergreen Athletic Fund last year. Our goal is to spread exposure to the sport and support the Olympic Dream for throwers of all levels, from beginners to world-class athletes. To do this, we would work on three fronts: we would work to instill the dream, nurture the dream, and help athletes realize the dream.

To instill the dream, we've tried to spread knowledge about the shot put, discus throw, javelin, and hammer throw. Few people even know about these obscure track and field events, so getting the word out is an important task. Be honest, how many of you had never seen a hammer throw before today? You are not alone and this speech has already informed a few more people. Our organization also publishes a popular webpage for my mentor, Harold Connolly, where we distribute free guides to learning the hammer throw and other resources for coaches and athletes of all levels who want to pick up the event.

To nurture the dream, the Evergreen Athletic Fund has worked hands on with local athletes. Learning about these events is one thing, but you need more to develop throwers; athletes must have coaching and support to excel. Just last month we brought in one of America's top throwers to put on a youth throwing clinic. The whole spectrum of athletes attended, from accomplished college throwers to a thirteen year old who had only tried the event once before. All of them took home some pointers that will get them headed in the right direction. This past summer, we also hosted several competitions. Since these events aren't always official high school sports, there are limited opportunities to compete and, for a high school thrower, competing is the most fun.

In addition, Evergreen Athletic Fund runs several websites that post national rankings and results for high school and college throwers. Youth throwing groups have emerged in pockets around the country and our website have been a great motivating device, connecting kids together and motivating them to improve each week. Three local throwers we have worked with qualified for the national rankings this year in the hammer throw, the first kids ever from the city of Seattle.

And finally, we also work to help elite athletes realize the dream. Elite athletes have different needs than the youth. After graduating from college, they face the same dilemma I did: it is difficult to juggle a job with training and, unlike Usain Bolt, even the best in our event rarely make enough to live off of. Our odd training schedules leave us looking for part-time work, often at a low paying night job. Gym memberships, coaching fees, costs of travel to competition, equipment, shoes, clothing, medical costs and massage all those add up and throwers often just scrape by. The Evergreen Athletic Fund has been raising funds to help cover some of the costs of training for local elite athletes who are very close to realizing that dream and just need our financial support to reach the next level.

It has been a rewarded experience to work with the Evergreen Athletic Fund. What makes it the most rewarding is that our goals are easily achievable. I am proud that we have realistic goals that still help the kids as much or more than other organizations by truly improving their lives. That makes this effort the most rewarding. As I've mentioned before, the throwing events are unique because success is open to almost anyone. That feature is what makes our goals so attainable.

Before I open this up to questions, I have one more story to share with you just to show this point. Back when I was in high school, I wasn't the only young hammer thrower in the area. There were several of us, and we motivated each other, even organizing the first ever unofficial Washington State High School Hammer Championships, an event which is still running to this day. We continued to compete against each other in college; all earning scholarships to schools across the nation: I went to UW; my friend Adam from Olympia went to USC; Nate, a graduate of Inglemoor High School, went to the University of Georgia; and Nick, a graduate of Shelton, went to North Carolina. In 2007, our last year in college, the four of us all placed in the top eight in the nation. All four of us were also on our way to finishing our college degrees and becoming successful young men. Standing on the podium that day, I knew this success could be replicated. If four of us could make it here out of a dozen local throwers, then I could only imagine the results in there were a hundred local throwers or more. The possibilities seemed endless. And the possibilities are endless. Whether or not I become an Olympian, the Olympic dream changed my life and has the possibility to change the lives of many others. If you are interested in learning more about our organization, please talk to me or visit our webpage at www.evergreenathletic.org. I'm now open to any questions you might have.

For more information about Martin Bingisser, visit his webpage at www.mbingisser.com.