
Inspiring Young Women Shot And Discus Throwers

The inspiration corner: Here are two remarkable young women who tell us why and how they started throwing and what motivates them to continue.

Thanks to coach Kirk Flatow for arranging these discussions.

When I arrived as the head track and field coach at Monta Vista High School, not only did we have no girls throwing the shot or the discus, no one could even tell me how many years it had been since we had a girl throw for the team. For the first year, we had no young woman even pick up a shot.

Next season, two girls who had run cross country in the fall came out for track and said they would throw. Cross country is not the place that I'd usually look for throwing talent, but Emma and Kiersten were willing to give throwing a try. Towards the end of the season, they approached me after a dual meet and asked me if I could design a summer training program for them—they wanted to be better throwers next year!

I was not sure what we had done, but somehow our team had two enthusiastic women throwers!

I believe that attracting young women to the throwing events is a challenge that faces coaches across the

U.S. I thought about what I'd tried to do to inspire them, but realized that what I may have thought was inspiring—and what actually inspired them—might be two different things! I'm extremely proud of these two remarkable young women, as they have found their own path to dedication and success; they did all the hard work. Editor Russ Ebbets and Olympic Gold Medalist Stephanie Brown Trafton joined me in posing some questions to our throwers about what encouraged them along their throwing journey. We hope that this dialogue contributes to the throwing community as we try to build our base of participation.

*—Kirk Flatow, Head Coach,
Monta Vista High School.*



Throwing Coach Andy Arness, Head Coach Kirk Flatow, Emma Seyer, Kiersten Chuc.

Coach Kirk Flatow: What was your athletic background prior to throwing the shot put and discus in high school? What got you started throwing in high school?

*With Kiersten Chuc and Emma Seyer
Varsity Throwers, Monta Vista High School, Cupertino, California*

My guy friends are impressed that I lift and lift heavy.



Emma Seyer

Emma Seyer: In the beginning, I joined cross country mostly because I wanted to improve my conditioning for soccer. I had been playing soccer since first grade, competing at the club level since seventh. By the end of that first cross country season, I found acceptance and friendship in my peers that I had never found on a soccer team and I decided that maybe I could continue developing those friendships on the track and field team, later in the year.

Enter shot put and discus.

I entered a little late into the T&F season as I had played high school soccer, and by that point Kiersten had already been down at the throwing rings for a week or so. On my first day I remember coming up to Coach Flatow and asking him what he thought I should do. “Why don’t you try shot put and discus with Kiersten?” I shrugged. I was tall, so throwing could work.

Throwing did work for me. Quite well too. Being good at anything is generally instrumental at motivating people to work harder, and I was no exception. Then somewhere between watching myself slowly improve and competing with

Kiersten as to who could throw the discus better (she won, every time.) I found that I loved throwing just as much, if not more than soccer.

By the end of the season, Kiersten and I both decided we wanted to do more with throwing and Coach Flatow was more than happy to encourage us. Over the summer we started lifting with Coach Andy Arness, head throws coach of neighboring Homestead High School.

Kiersten Chuc: In sixth grade, we had a track and field unit in our PE class. Nothing special, but I remember that I was one of the only kids who could actually throw the discus properly. This experience kick-started my throwing career.

After middle school, I had a period of stagnation during freshman year in which I joined no sports teams. Then I decided to join cross country to be with my old running friends, which lead me into track and field. Like Emma, I chose to join the track and field team because of my experiences with the cross country team. Track and field was a way for me to stay with the friends I had made during the fall season.

As to choosing which event to do, I already knew that I was going to do the throws, a decision based upon my middle school experiences.

Since our throwing coach didn’t arrive until after the first hour of track practice started, the head coach allowed us to run with the distance group at the beginning of track practices. This was a nice arrangement, as it allowed Emma and me to stay with our cross country friends for a little bit each day. Thus my connection to my first high school team experience was maintained. Because of cross country, I was able to start developing my commitment to throwing.

Russ Ebbets: *Athletic participation can be summarized as moving through three stages – the fun stage, the commitment stage and the performance stage. As you transition from fun to commitment, training becomes more frequent and regimented. How have you made this transition without losing interest in your event?*

Kiersten: I never felt like there was a change through these stages—I have always found throwing fun.



Success in the throws is predicated on work in the weight room.



Being the only girl in the weight room was never an issue with Kiersten Chuc.

While there was an increase in my commitment and training hours and while I started putting more structure in my throwing development, I have never lost the fun of throwing. I may have started out just wanting to do throwing for the heck of it, but as the training and I got more serious, I still kept the joy of feeling a heavy projectile fly out of my hand. A sport should never become a chore or burden. For me, once the fun and passion are lost from a sport, the sport loses its point. If we make sacrifices to excel, we should excel in something that we thoroughly enjoy.

Emma: Training every day, often more than three hours on weekdays, along with homework can be really hard. But that feeling you get when

you finally get Coach's approval on your right foot pivot or reverse feels really, really good. So when training gets overwhelming, I think about those days that prove that I am, in fact, improving. I also remind myself how much I would miss seeing my coach and hanging out with the other throwers; they are as much of why I come to practice as my desire to improve. There was just a point where I decided that despite the time commitment and how aggravated I would sometimes become with my progress did not outweigh what I wanted to achieve.

Stephanie Brown Trafton: My favorite part of throwing in high school was the camaraderie of the team. Even though each event is considered individual, do you

think being a team player on a track and field team is important and why?

Kiersten: I believe that being a team player is important because while you may ultimately compete alone, you train as a team. On our team, all of us are willing to help our teammates become better athletes. We give advice to each other, we encourage each other, we cheer each other on during meets. As I see others getting better, I want to get better myself. I have found that improving my own skills is something that is best done with others who are also working hard and supporting me.

Just knowing that a team is waiting for me helps me show up! One of the hardest parts of training is simply getting out the door, getting to the workout, and putting in the time. The team holds me accountable. And the people on the team are my friends—I want to see them every day. The combination of accountability, and wanting to be there with my friends, helps me put in the time I need to put in to achieve my goals.

I've seen what happens when you are not part of a team. One of the throwers had conflicts with team practice, so he had to practice on his own. Without a coach or teammates to make sure he showed up, he would throw for only a few minutes then split. What he did was not one of the most promising shows of lone wolf training.

Emma: Even though we compete separately the competition and support we have with our teammates pushes us to do better than we ever could have by ourselves. We are competing with each other, but I don't feel judged because we see each other every day, good and bad.

And it's the fact that we see each other every day that pushes us to work harder, because it's one thing to not throw farther than some kid from another school, it's another if your *friends* beat you, because you *know* them. And you see them throw every day and you know you have the capability to beat them. Also, if one of us has a PR that day, everyone cheers or claps, because that person with the PR would do the same for everyone else.

Kiersten: When we are competing, the team also provides company while I am waiting for my event. It's easy to get inside my head and feel awkward just standing around while waiting for my flight to come up. Teammates make it easy to wait and not get all worked up.

R.E.: **The throws are a technique-dominated event group. What did you find were effective ways to learn a technique? Drills, videos, visualization or other methods?**

Emma: I like to break a technique down into steps so I can really go through every piece of it and understand why the movement works the way it does. Then when I'm actually doing the technique, I like to see one of the advanced throwers doing the same thing so I can get a visual of what it should look like. Then just practicing over and over again while coach watches on and critiques me. This part is often frustrating. But it works for me.

Kiersten: What works for me was a combination of watching others, watching myself on video, and having a coach correct me every step of the way, as well as constant practice. Knowing how a throw is supposed to look, then seeing myself beside that perfect throw helps me notice



Emma and Stephanie Brown Trafton, 2008 Olympic discus gold medalist. A visit by Stephanie was inspirational to Emma and Kiersten and the whole track team.

problems that I wouldn't notice while actually doing the technique. Drills help me up to a certain extent, but threading the pieces together in an actual spin or glide is what gives me the best idea as to what to do. Drills are helpful in getting your feet wet, but what you really need to do is just dive into the water, regardless of how you may first look, flailing around. I needed to keep in mind that not everyone started out perfect doing the techniques. You need to let go of any embarrassment and just try.

R.E.: **As the child athlete matures to adolescent and young adult she must come to grips with her own body changes that she can't control (growth spurts, etc) and body changes that are created via training. While a "little kid" may feel well all the time the adolescent needs to learn to "deal with pain" or discomfort from time to time. How do you get through those rough spots?**

Emma: I've gone through enough conditioning through soccer, cross country and lifting to know that the body will adapt, if you are patient enough. If you've made the decision that your improvement matters more than the initial discomfort, that should be enough to motivate you to continue on with your conditioning.

Kiersten: The soreness can drive some people away early on in the process, but for me, it seems really useless to get sore once or twice and then give up. The pain doesn't deter me at all. It's a sign of how hard I am working to reach my goals and actually drives me forward. Maybe I'm a little bit of a masochist—I revel in not being able to move anything without feeling like a rusted doll in every joint and muscle.

R.E.: **Success in the throws is predicated on work in the weight room. The training for a female may be problematic for several reasons – unfamiliarity with proper**

technique, unfamiliarity with lifting programs in general, the intimidation factor of being the only females in the weight room, and even the personal fear of becoming “too muscle-ly” or too bulked up. Were these concerns for you? How do you get past these concerns? What would you say to other young women who are reluctant to start working in the weight room?

Emma: Well for one thing, being female means having estrogen. Having estrogen, being a female, means it is basically impossible to get too bulked up--unless of course you are taking something. See, I pay attention in Physiology. I did have to learn lifting techniques. My throwing coach, Andy Arness, is also a weightlifting coach and he is really personable and enthusiastic so I felt comfortable asking him for help, even if I felt a bit like a fish out of water. It was also really helpful to have another girl in the weight room instead of always having to work with the guys. However, the guys on our team were always really nice in the weight room, and Coach Andy made it clear to all of us that there would be consequences to the guys if they weren't supportive of the girls.

As for being one of the few girls in the weight room? I can think of worse things.

Kiersten: At the beginning of my lifting experience, my main concern was trying to get the lifting techniques down quickly so that I didn't look like a dork. It was awkward at first, seeing the guys with their seamless motions and comparing it to my flopping attempts, but perseverance and a lack of shame won in the end. After I mastered the lifting techniques, everything

else about the weight room was smooth sailing.

Being the only girl in the weight room was never an issue with me. I've always been comfortable with guys and they were all very helpful and nice when I first came into the lifting fold. None of them made me feel like I was trespassing on sacred male territory. I suppose that some girls would be uncomfortable with no other females in the vicinity, but thankfully, I'm not one of them.

Emma: Having the guys lifting with us is a plus. Most of them are really good at what they do, and their humor never fails to amuse me. I'm fairly certain they are all just overgrown children. They have flex-offs. Seriously.

S.B.T: **I had the opportunity to have the use of the weight room from my freshman through senior years in school. This was a major factor of my success as an athlete not only in track and field but in volleyball and basketball as well. What are your thoughts about lifting weights, both in the way it makes you feel physically and how others react to it when you are in the weight room or tell them about lifting weights?**

Kiersten: I love lifting! It's almost become a separate sport for me, even though the reason I lift is to improve my throwing performance. Knowing that I'm getting stronger and seeing the numbers in what I can lift grow makes me happy and proud that I can accomplish something that not many others can.

I love seeing the reactions of others when I bring up the topic of weight lifting. When I talk to my friends about lifting, they are all impressed, especially the boys. When I talk to my guy friends, they're

impressed that I not only lift, but that I lift pretty heavy weights. One of the guys even commented, "The fact that she even knows what we're talking about is impressive" when they were asking me about my cleans and squats. I rather enjoy being "one of the guys."

Emma: When I say that I lift and throw shot and disc, the reaction has been completely positive. I love how in lifting you can see how you improve, get stronger, and measure the improvement as the weeks go by. It's an incredibly satisfying feeling.

R.E.: **What were the first lifts you learned? Which lifts have been the most helpful? Which have been the most difficult to master?**

Emma: Cleans are definitely the easier to learn out of all the lifts, and one of the most fun, because you can lift a lot more with them than you can with a snatch. Snatches are definitely the most scary, and then if you're scared of the lift, then that's a mental barrier that you have to overcome to improve. I really love squats though: they're just fun.

Kiersten: When we first started lifting, Coach Andy just poured all the lifts on us. The clean was one of the first lifts that we learned, and after many trials, it became one of the easier lifts. The snatch was one of the harder lifts to learn, and one of the scariest. Having a heavy barbell above your head is not something to shrug off. It took awhile for me to acclimate to the snatch, and I got used to the lift, but even now, I'm still wary of it, and it's definitely not one of my favorites. The squat was somewhere in the middle. It was a new idea to leave all the weight on your heels and to stick your butt out, but after a few tries, it was

pretty easy to do. Now, squats are my thing and I love doing them!

K.F.: Is there anything else that the coach can do to make the weight room more comfortable for girls getting started?

Emma: Basically what we described above, but I think there's also a type of girl, if you will, who's okay with being surrounded by a bunch of guys in a weight room. Not every girl is going to be willing to do that. If I was a girl that liked nothing better than watching Nicholas Sparks movies, I'm probably not going to be the best candidate for hanging out with a bunch of sweaty guys all day and throwing heavy implements around. (Coach's note: Emma is definitely not a Nicholas Sparks' girl, she is more of a *Game of Thrones* girl. I'm considering using movie and TV preferences as a part of my talent identification process!—KF)

R.E.: Hollywood and its projected view of "beauty" often sets the tone for how females are judged by males and even other females. One of the problems American female throwers battle against is this image. What methods do you use to maintain your focus?

Emma: I'm not trying to fight an image, I just want to throw. Working out for the purpose of being thin is not the goal, and I'm just fine with being seen as stronger looking than most of the other girls at school. I'm not expecting to be something I'm not. I like who I am.

Kiersten: I like breaking the normal image. I like being able to use throwing and lifting as a conversation starter, in part because what I am doing is unusual. Being out of

the societal mold is something that I enjoy and I parade it instead of hiding it.

While it's true that many of the more serious throwers are reasonably bulky looking, there are others who don't look like small mountains who throw just as far. In order for a girl to compete in a sport that girls don't normally participate in, she has to be mentally tough in addition to physically strong in order to stand against any negative comments. Don't let society decide how you should view yourself. I like throwing, so I do it. I don't let others erroneously judge me as less of a person for my preferences.

S.B.T.: The concept of "fair play" is taught to young athletes in club sports but I don't remember that much being said about this as a high school athlete in the team setting. It may have been something that we talked about once a year led by the Athletic Director that glossed over lots of topics. It seems to be that the coaches themselves are relied upon to teach this to high school athletes and it is up to them where, when, or even if to have discussions about such issues as competing clean (without the use of performance enhancing drugs) or sportsmanship in general. Who, if anyone, has talked to you about fair play and sportsmanship? What discussions about fair play and sportsmanship have you had with your coaches? Do you have any experiences where you had open discussion about these topics with your teammates? Can you make some suggestions as to how this can be implemented into your teams, or if it already has can you give an example of how this has been done for you and your team?

Kiersten: By the time that we arrive in high school, the idea of fair play, no drugs, no cheating, has been gone over so many times that for a coach to review the subject at length would be boring. Most athletes on my team would tune out and start playing on their phones. While it is an important idea that coaches should touch upon, it isn't worth an entire seminar at the beginning of the season. Just a few sentences would do. If the athletes choose to break the rules, they do so in full knowledge of the illegality of their actions.

Emma: I agree. We know that our coaches are the sort of people who are committed to fair play and following the rules. I think everyone on the team is fully aware that if any one of us were caught using drugs or abusive substances at any time, or cheating in any way, we would be kicked off the team immediately with no second chance. Coach Flatow and Coach Andy are very big on honor and fair play when it comes to throwing and lifting. I respect these coaches enough that if I were ever to abuse substances their disappointment in me would be the greatest punishment.

K.F.: Is there anything else that helped develop your enthusiasm for throwing, or makes you happy and proud to be part of the community of throwers?

Kiersten: Just being around great people is something that I love about the throwing community. Since waiting around during meets is a common process, all of the throwers from different schools see each other several times over the season. I've made many new friends since I've started throwing and we keep in touch even when out of track season.

Emma: Like Kiersten it's the community I've found while throwing. Most of the people who participate in throwing tend to be incredibly friendly and open. Meeting Stephanie Brown Trafton and John Godina were also fascinating experiences just because they've achieved so much. I know not every student athlete gets to meet two people who have gone to the Olympics more than once. Meeting those two athletes in person helped me to understand that these are people who have won all these awards and medals, not fantasy characters or aliens or terminators from the Sarah Connor Chronicles. Also having two coaches who really care about you and honestly want you to reach the absolute best you can possibly be is something I haven't always been afforded by a coach and something I really appreciate.

K.F.: What are your goals and ambitions for throwing after graduating from high school?

Kiersten: I'd love to keep throwing or lifting after high school, but I don't know if I'll be on or close to par with the collegiate athletes. If I improve enough next year, I may join the collegiate track team. However, lifting is one thing that I will definitely continue to pursue. I don't need to lift with a team, and I can continue to get stronger regardless of how strong anyone else is around me.

Emma: Ditto. I enjoy lifting and throwing too much to let it go completely.

K.F.: What impact do you think your high school throwing career has had on your life outside throwing--academics or your social life? Do you think your experiences

with throwing and track and field have changed you?

Kiersten: Being so committed to throwing has limited the time that I can spend with my friends. Whole Saturdays are eaten up by lifting and Sundays are committed to finishing homework. During the week, I go home early in order to get some work done before I go to school practice. However, the time crunch has just taught me to be more efficient in how I work and to stop wasting time. I still make time for my friends, and I appreciate that time much more than I did before throwing.

My experiences this past year have given me more self-confidence in my physical prowess as well as a larger social pool. I'm thankful to have been able to make these memories with all these new connections.

Emma: I am a junior with a full class load, and I am balancing homework from Advanced Placement US History, British Literature, Physiology and Algebra 2, along with throwing and lifting. All these commitments mean I have to be really careful how I allocate my time. However, being a thrower also means I have my niche where I "belong" and plenty of people I would never have met otherwise, so I really don't regret the time challenges.

K.F.: Do you have any other messages for coaches? Any suggestions on how to make throwing more attractive to young women? What do you want from your coaches?

Kiersten: Coaches need to keep in mind that one-on-one connections with their athletes are important. Making sure that individual athletes know that they are appreciated

for their commitment to track can make all the difference in whether they stay or decide that sports are a waste of their time.

Coaches can also explicitly lay out the message that throwing isn't an exclusively boys sport. I don't know a way to sweeten the idea of throwing, since it is what it is. However, coaches can let girls know that if they try it out, they won't be left to flounder in confusion. Let girls know that there is a support system.

Emma: Coaches need to just be aware that there are differences in effectively coaching guys to girls, even those that aren't fond of Nicholas Sparks.

Thank you to...

Emma: Also, thanks to the whole of my family for driving me to and from Homestead, along with always wanting to watch me compete, even if it was freezing cold. And thank you to Coach Andy and Coach Flatow who have been overwhelmingly supportive and thrilled to do things that not all coaches would care to do.

Kiersten: Thanks to my parents for driving me to Homestead and meets on demand and for their continued support for my crazy training hours. Thanks to Coach Flatow for setting us up with the Homestead coach as well as all the Olympic class athletes. And finally, thanks to Coach Andy for taking so much of his outside time to ensure that his athletes perform to the best of their potential and beyond.

LIFE AFTER THROWING

Pursuit of excellence in high school track and field can be dismissed as a trivial pursuit; a small percentage of athletes will continue to compete beyond high school, and an infinitesimal number will make a living from track. What difference does it make if an athlete can throw a shot 40' or not, or run under 5 minutes for a mile?

The coach's hope is that the pursuit of excellence in track and field will have a positive impact on the athlete's life, in school and beyond; that somehow we are contributing to a better society beyond our track and field family.

Elizabeth Wanless achieved an elite level, throwing for the USA 2005 world championship team, before retiring from track and pursuing her professional career. Liz graciously answered some questions about how her throwing career has benefited her "life after track." Liz acknowledges the impact that her coach, Larry Judge, had on her life, not only in throwing but also on her career afterwards. I'm sure that any coach would be honored and humbled to be told by their athletes that they had the impact that Liz describes.—Kirk Flatow

What lessons did participating in the throwing events in track and field teach you, and what have you been able to apply to your current professional career and future career aspirations?

Understanding how to work through burnout: Everyone gets tired in their job and those feelings of discomfort and fatigue creep up, just like they did in track and field. When I was an athlete, we worked very hard to rise above those feelings because there were performance implications. In the workforce, I don't see people work hard to rise above burnout. I see a lot of people giving in to what they think is an unnatural feeling. For instance, at times I am tired of teaching, but like in track and field, I am setting little goals each day to keep me motivated (something I learned from my coach). Understanding that burnout is a part of life, I can cope with it a lot better than my co-workers around me.

Working with colleagues you don't like: In track and field, sometimes you are forced to work and practice with people you don't like and people who don't like you. In most cases, you are working with people you are competing with. I have noticed that some of my colleagues really have trouble with workplace competition and working with people who have gossiped about them. In track, I learned everyone has their purpose, even the mean individuals you prefer not to be around. Most everyone has something worthwhile about them or you can use people to motivate you. Workplace competition is *NOTHING* compared to what I faced in track and field!

Learning to eat right: Through track and field, I met with dieticians concerning performance-improving foods. I didn't realize at the time that I was learning healthy habits for the lifetime that I wouldn't have learned otherwise.

Self-motivation: In track and field, I was accountable for my own workouts at times. I learned how to push myself when no one is around. This is an incredibly important skill in my field; no one is watching you and no one is over your head making sure you publish, present and teach well. Without the skills I learned through track and field, I would not be as effective in an independent workplace.

You are only as good as your last throw: I learned through track and field never to get too excited or too low about any performance outcome. Just as you are only as good as your last throw in track and field, you are only as good as your last class, publication or otherwise in my field. This keeps me motivated to keep doing better and maintain the even keel emotional level I have to keep really helps keep me on track.

Love the process: There will always be ten people better than you at something. If you are in the game purely for the accolades, you won't last. I feel colleagues around me are upset that they aren't the best or that they don't measure up to other colleagues. Their egos are based on what people are doing around them. In track, I learned to set my own goals, love the process, and be comfortable with reaching my own goals regardless of what everyone around me was doing.

Goal setting: I use the same goal setting process now that I did in track and field.

Now that I look back, track really set the pace for how effective and successful I have been in the workplace. I am so thankful for my coach Dr. Larry Judge and my experiences. He taught me so much about myself and helped me unlock my potential as an athlete and a person. I can't imagine what I would be without him.

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