

Marla Ridenour: German standout helps turn Zips into 'pole vault heaven'

By Marla Ridenour
Beacon Journal sports columnist



University of Akron pole vaulter Annika Roloff is ranked No. 2 in the nation among women.
(Ed Suba Jr./Akron Beacon Journal)

Annika Roloff has traveled all over Europe to compete in track and field, accompanied only by her father. At national meets in Germany, she had to motivate the crowd to get behind her. That's why what happened two weekends ago when she set a University of Akron indoor record in the pole vault at the 10th annual Akron Invitational was so special. Those emotions weren't just prompted by her clearing 14-03.50, tied for No. 3 in the country, but also by what happened afterward.

"Everybody cheered for me," Roloff said. "That was amazing. It's a total different feeling. I've been training alone in Germany. That's why I love it here so much, there are people I can talk to.

"I love to be part of the team, to feel the support from them. That's why I want to help out here."

Zips track and field coach Dennis Mitchell has long dreamed of building UA into a pole vault school. Around the Stile Athletics Field House, it's referred to as "Pole Vault Heaven."

In his 19 years at UA, Mitchell has produced five first-team All-American pole vaulters — John Russell, Mike Uhle, Kira Sims, Carrie Kayes and current sophomore Shawn Barber. But neither of Mitchell's two NCAA champions triumphed in that event.

Mitchell's vision is coming closer to fruition, especially with the arrival of Roloff, a junior, this season and the presence of Barber, ranked No. 2 in the nation after his Canadian indoor record-setting jump of 18-06.50 at the Akron meet.

Last year Mitchell said UA led the country with eight pole vaulters making it to the preliminaries of the NCAA outdoor championships. The NCAA indoor meet is March 14-15 in Albuquerque, N.M. To get them ready, five Zips (three of them pole vaulters) competed at the Don Kirby Elite Invitational last weekend at the same venue.

Teams ranked

A week ago, for the first time in program history, the Zips men's and women's teams ranked in the U.S. Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association's top 25. The women's rating of No. 20 and the men's of No. 21 was the highest achieved by either team since the USTFCCA system began in 2008. Besides Barber and Roloff, among those boosting the Zips are junior Alex McCune,

No. 2 in the heptathlon and No. 18 in the pole vault, senior Brittany Funk, No. 4 in the weight throw, and freshman Weronika Gaudyn, No. 10 in the triple jump.

Above all, it appears UA has become a pole vault destination.

"We've tried to create our own brand identification across the country, and I think now it's starting to stick," Mitchell said last week before practice. "Every year I get to recruit the very best in the nation. They may not all come, but at least we're in the running. Then we're trying to develop kids other people didn't know were going to be great as well."

Universities in California, Tennessee and Oklahoma wanted Barber, but Mitchell lured him with UA's \$20 million field house, strong academic programs and a relationship with Barber's father, George, whom he competed against in college in the 1980s.

Roloff's connection was UA freshman pole vaulter Caroline Hasse of Potsdam, Germany. Roloff, who turns 23 next month, said she has known Hasse for eight years. Attending Leibniz University in Hanover, Germany, Roloff said she was required to spend a semester abroad. Hasse suggested Roloff come to UA and passed along Mitchell's phone number.

That's how UA signed Roloff, who has twice competed at the U-23 European championships, finishing third in the pole vault three years ago.

Enticing environment

Mitchell isn't sure whether Roloff will stay at UA but said there was the same uncertainty with Hasse. He hopes Roloff's enjoyment of the team experience will help.

"It's a lot more individual in the rest of the world," Mitchell said. "For us, especially at the high school and college level, it's very much a team sport. Every kid, when you're starting to go for a title and you're doing something for the team, it helps you perform a lot better and it's a lot of fun. She can hurdle and long jump as well. She's sitting fourth in the conference in the hurdles. She's a really good athlete all-around."

Mitchell, 54, would love to see Roloff and Barber capture NCAA titles in the event so close to his heart.

Mitchell competed as a pole vaulter at the University of Utah and Abilene Christian. As an assistant for six years at Texas and four years at North Carolina, he produced four Longhorn All-Americans and saw Kevin Brown become the first North Carolina collegian to clear 18-feet. Mitchell spent a decade working in the national program at the U.S. Olympic Training Center and was assistant chair of the development program.

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