



“WATCHING HER FLY”

Senior high jumper Grace Pickell continues her high jump career after a summer mixed with success and defeat

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“It’s a part of the sport,” Grace Pickell’s dad always says. “Jumpers always end on a failure.”

“No matter what, even if you win the meet, and you win state, or you win the Olympics,” he’ll remind her. “You always end with hitting the bar. There’s just a limit to how high you can jump.”

Grace doesn’t want to believe her dad. She keeps her eyes focused on the turf under her fluorescent pink and yellow Nike spikes, refusing to watch her competitors continue to jump.

She fights the tears.

She’s not used to this.

She’s not used to watching girls jump higher than her. She’s not used to finishing last, and she doesn’t like it. Sitting on the hot turf of the stadium in Bloomington, Indiana, she just feels wrong.

She’s used to winning. She likes winning.

“Once I start something, I get really competitive, and I just need to win,” Grace says. “It doesn’t matter if it’s just a silly pick up game of basketball or a national championship, I get into it. I’m not conceited, I just want to win.”

Grace knows that she’s lost the chance to win the meet, the National Championships. As she packs her track bag, she decides to put it all behind her. The off day. The high nerves. The bad finish. There’s always another meet just around the corner.

A slow chant fills Cessna Stadium with a rumble. Over and over again, they chant the same name.

Grace is doing the impossible. Or at least, what she thought was the impossible. She’s peaking at state. She’s about to win state. She’s going to set a record in the process.

She takes a moment to look at the verse written in silver Sharpie inside her left wrist—Isaiah 41:10.

“So do not fear, for I am with you;

Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you;

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”

She starts her approach. Ten steps. Bends the knees. Into the air.

All she does is pray. Please, God, please, let me clear it. Don’t let my shoulders hit, don’t let my back hit, don’t let my heels hit.

And then, impact. Grace has landed on the mats and she hasn’t even brushed the bar.

Tim Pickell and Grace’s jump coach Chuck Sulzen watch from the stands as Grace shatters their expectations once again.

She had started the year with excruciating pain—tendinitis in her left leg. Grace sat out practices. Her coaches simply hoped that she would make it through her first meet.

So they didn’t expect Grace to win her first meet. Or her second. Or her third. They didn’t expect her to continue, almost undefeated, all the way to the state championship. And they didn’t expect to be leaping to their feet as Grace cleared the bar, set at the state record breaking height of 5’ 10 1/2”.

On the mats, Grace can hardly contain herself. Everything around her is a blur. She catches tiny details—a friend from St. Thomas Aquinas running to hug her, the bright colors of uniforms, the tears streaking down head coach Brie Meshke’s face.

“She honestly exceeded every expectation I could have set for her,” Meshke said. “It was one of the most exciting moments of my coaching career, watching her clear on her first jump. It was awesome. It was perfect.”

Grace races towards her dad and her coaches. She hugs them, then bends over, dropping her hands onto her knees and laughing at what she has accomplished.

“Seeing your child achieve something that they’ve worked so hard for and that they really love,” Tim said. “It’s just like watching a bird fly. It’s beautiful.”

After winning State, Grace was looking forward to flying through a summer of meets. She’d been invited to participate in the Junior Olympics, which consisted of three meets—the regional qualifier in New Mexico, the national qualifier in Bloomington and the world competition in Barcelona, Spain.

Grace took second in New Mexico, barely clipping her heels as she attempted to clear the Olympic trials height of six feet. She went into Bloomington with confidence, predicted to take second in the competition,

expected to progress quickly to Barcelona.

Once again, she shattered expectations, but not in the way she wanted.

There are a lot of things Grace and her dad remember from Nationals. It was hot. The competitors were quiet, serious. Most of them were in college, wearing Florida University and Texas A&M on their jerseys. What Grace remembers the most is the starting height—5’ 7”. Almost a foot higher than the starting height at State.

Grace didn’t place first. She didn’t place second. She didn’t place at all. They could think up a million excuses, but Grace and her dad have settled on the same conclusion.

“It was a bad day,” Tim says. “Maybe things didn’t go how they were supposed to. Too bad. She’s still a good jumper.”

The steep, grassy hill behind East from the junior lot to the tennis courts doesn’t look very friendly to Grace. Not after two hours of sprinting, core work, shot putting and jumping in the Kansas heat with an Olympian.

Grace, her family and her coaches aren’t just training for next week’s meet anymore. They’re not just training her to defend her state title. They’re readying her for Division I jumping. They’re training her to fight for a spot on the team that will wear red, white and blue in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Former Olympian Ed Broxterman is helping her do just that. After contacting the Pickells at the end of the summer, Broxterman has spent two or three hours a week training Grace. He gives her additional workouts to do on her own that focus on strength and endurance. Although Grace describes each session as “grueling,” she believes that harder training will prepare her for college.

To get to a Division I level of competitiveness, Grace is using a combination of basketball training and workouts that Broxterman provides her. The running and weightlifting that head basketball coach Scott Stein gives her help Grace to gain strength, while training with Broxterman focuses on the technique of each jump.

Grace doesn’t just confine her workouts to the times she schedules with Broxterman. Despite the glaring heat and humidity of early September, she still enjoys to head out onto the track with a friend to practice jumps.

Each training, recreational or not, has the same goal of preparation. With college applications nearing, Grace knows her top three schools: Kansas State, Kansas University and Arkansas University. The next year will be dedicated to decision making.

The morning of July 1, Grace didn’t want to think about college. She turned her cell phone off. It was the first day that colleges were allowed to personally call Grace. She was afraid to have to pick up the phone and be asked to say, “Yes” or “No” to an offer from a college.

Emails from colleges have been streaming into the inboxes of Grace and East athletic director Sam Brown since her victory at State. Around the nation, colleges ranging from Division III schools like Wichita State to high ranked universities like Alabama and Kansas State want Grace to jump for them.

Grace has been calling on Brown for advice ever since he became the new director at the end of the last school year. When it comes to which college to choose, he only has one piece of advice.

“At this point, Grace can go wherever she wants,” Brown said. “She’s got the abilities and she’s got the intelligence and the grades. Now she just needs to choose based on the school, on what she wants to major in, because she’s going to excel wherever she is.”

They believe that Grace can do it, and so does she. Grace doubted herself in Bloomington, but only for a second.

Tim says that every jumper always ends on a failure. Grace doesn’t want to think about limits, or failure. Grace wants to prove him wrong. The bar and mats on the ruddy track behind East aren’t stowed away until she’s had a perfect jump.

Sometimes it takes five jumps, sometimes it takes 50, but eventually, Grace always clears the bar.