

Pole Vaulters,

It is with sadness that I write to inform you all of the recent death of Ryan Moberg, a high school pole vaulter in Walla Walla, Washington, due to injuries he suffered at pole vault practice. You can find more information here: <http://polevaultpower.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=14481>

In discussing pole vault safety with Jan Johnson, the National Safety Chair for USA Track & Field Pole Vault Development, a few issues concern me. Generally, with pole vault injuries, we tend to have multiple catastrophic injuries in one year, then a few years with none, then multiple in the same year. Late March and the entire month of April are the most dangerous time of year for the sport due to the highest participation rates.

Many of you may be relatively new to the sport and do not remember 2002 when there were four catastrophic injuries, three resulting in death within our sport. Since then, many within the pole vault community have worked hard to come up with standards to make the pole vault safer.

Pits are now required to be bigger and education and coaching certification opportunities have increased. According to Jan Johnson, since 2002, the rate of catastrophic injuries has improved from an average of nearly 2 per year to less than .5 per year, and all catastrophic injuries since 2002 were a result of non-compliance with the rules.

Unfortunately, many have grown complacent since then. I constantly see pictures and videos posted to my website of kids vaulting at unsafe facilities. I hear stories from all over the country of illegal pits, no padding around the pit and other unsafe conditions.

This has to stop! As a sport we cannot afford to have any more catastrophic injuries this year. Pole vault is close to extinction in several states, they are just looking for an excuse to drop it.

There are two basic components of pole vault safety: facilities and technique.

Facilities are an easy variable to control and demand constant attention.

It is crucial that at every meet and every practice you vault at a facility that is setup according to the rules:

1. The pit needs to meet the minimum dimensions for high school or college rules: i.e. 19'8" wide X 16'5" behind the back of the planting box, with front buns extending minimally to the front of the planting box.
2. A common top cover that holds the system together.
3. Pad the area around the planting box so that no hard surfaces exist in this very critical area.
4. Pad the standard bases in this highly critical area.
5. Pad or remove any and all hard surfaces around the landing pit.

These are not optional. If you travel to a school that cannot meet these requirements, don't jump!!! I believe the high school rules require a school that is unable to provide a legal setup to forfeit all points for that event. It is not worth risking your life to try and get another PR or to score a few points for your team.

Most of the deaths and catastrophic injuries in the pole vault have occurred from vaulters hitting their head on a hard surface around the pit. We need to do everything we can to find ways to cover these surfaces. Additionally, all pole vaulting and vault related drills must be done in a way so as to assure that the vaulter lands in the center of the landing pads.

Here are a few basic principles about pole vault technique we should all keep in mind to keep the sport safer:

1. Your number one goal is to land in the middle of the pit every time. This is more important than clearing the bar! Vaulters: EVERY time you have a jump that does not land in the middle of the pit, you need to ask your coach WHY and make adjustments to fix it!
2. Select a grip height and pole size that conforms to your abilities. It is better to grip lower and land safely in the pit than to grip too high and land in the box.
3. Be safety selective about your jumping, so that you do not pole vault when the weather, wind, or facilities make it too dangerous.
4. Do not participate in the now outlawed practice of tapping.
5. Place more emphasis on clearing bars a greater distance above your grip and less emphasis on gripping high.
6. Educate yourself constantly. Go to camps and clinics. Buy books and DVDs. Talk to other coaches. The best coaches are constantly trying to get better. The worst coaches think they know it all. If you need help finding a camp or want advice on good books/DVDs I would be happy to offer it.

Please forward this email to everyone you know involved with the pole vault. It is crucial that we come together as a community to make the sport safer and prevent any more lives from being lost doing what we love.

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