

Brains and Brawn: UW law student chases Olympic dream in hammer throw

Gail Wood; *The Olympian* (Olympia, Wash.)

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Before Martin Bingisser became one of the best hammer throwers in the country and an Olympic hopeful, and before he became an A student admitted into the University of Washington law school, he was a slacker, an underachiever with no gumption.

Then he met his inspiration — the hammer, a 16-pound ball on a chain.

On Saturday, Bingisser, who is in his second year of law school and is a senior in eligibility on Washington's track team, will throw for the Huskies in the UW Indoor Invitational.

"I don't think I'd be here without the hammer," Bingisser said. "I'd be in college, but not law school."

It's Bingisser's high school success with the hammer and a conversation with a former Olympic gold medalist that sparked an unlikely climb from mediocrity to excellence, both in athletics and academics.

"Athletics carries over to academics," Bingisser said. "They kind of help each other out. If you're lazy in one part of your life, you won't work hard in the other."

Prior to his epiphany, he flunked a high school English class, was an out of shape 300-pound lineman for his Interlake High School football team in Bellevue and carried a GPA under 3.0.

Now, at 6-foot-2, he's a fit 240 pounds, carried a 3.87 GPA as an undergrad with a degree in philosophy and is one of just seven UW hammer throwers to top 200 feet.

"I think that athletic vision was there even in high school," Bingisser said. "But I sure as heck didn't think I'd be in law school. I didn't even want to be a lawyer. That really surprises me. Athletically, most people wouldn't think I'd be where I am, but in the back of my mind I always thought I could be here."

Bingisser's unlikely transformation began in the fall of his senior year when he met Hal Connolly, the 1956 Olympic gold medalist in the hammer.

Connolly, visiting the Northwest to host a hammer clinic, stayed three nights at Bingisser's home, providing some inspirational talks and turning on a light inside Bingisser.

It's become quite a glow.



STEVE BLOOM/THE OLYMPIAN

Bingisser is just the second UW student to graduate and still have two years of eligibility remaining. He's the third-ranked returning hammer thrower in the Pac-10, trailing only UCLA's Boldizsar Kocsor and the USC's Adam Midles, a Capital High School graduate.

"It's incredible what he's done," said Brian Beaky, Washington's assistant sports information director. "You hear about someone doing something special in sports and in academics, but to be doing it all together is remarkable."

Bingisser is looking toward the 2008 Olympic trials.

"I'll be out of track at the UW, but I'll still be in law school," said Bingisser, whose father is a Boeing tax accountant and his mother a school nurse. "I should be able to make the standard."

The top 24 throwers in the country qualify for the trials. With a personal-best throw of 214 feet, Bingisser was ranked 28th last year.

Bingisser is a contradiction of the stereotype about athletes being dumb jocks and brainiacs being slothful bookworms welded to a couch. In Bingisser's world, brain and brawn go hand-in-hand.

"I think there needs to be a good balance," said Bingisser, who wants to go into tax law. "If I'm in the library six hours straight, there's a point of diminishing returns."

His study breaks are a two-hour track workout. But with his daily studies, interning with a judge in Tacoma and doing track, there's little room for leisure. However, after not having a TV last year, he's recently picked one up.

"I like watching sports," said Bingisser, who has two older sisters who attended college.

Bingisser's hectic schedule doesn't seem to wear him down.

"He's busy but he never seems stressed," Beaky said. "He's just a terrific guy."

Bingisser is able to speak sports and academia, making him a rarity.

"My friends on the track team, we're not talking about the constitutionality of something," he said. "We're talking about the football game that was on the night before."

Bingisser is usually out the door by 6 a.m. to study, heads to Tacoma for his internship by mid-morning and squeezes in a two-hour track practice five times a week. It's a busy schedule. He insists track revitalizes, not drains.

"I have friends who spend all their time in the library and by the end of the year they'd get more burned out than I do," Bingisser said. "No one else in law school does sports like I do. One works 10 hours a week and another volunteers. They see it as a break, just like I do."

Bingisser is certainly one of a kind, someone who lives comfortably in two worlds. "If I focus totally on one thing, I'd drive myself crazy," Bingisser said. "I need a little break. Academics have the priority. Athletics is an outlet."

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