

“I like the rush from pole vault, and being high off the ground.
My personal high is actually getting high in pole vault.”

CAMERON HORN MONTVILLE



BOB KARP/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Randolph senior Savanna Brackelmanns-Puig clears the bar during the Morris County Championships.

FALLING WITH STYLE

Morris County pole vaulters are raising the bar
in ‘the craziest thing’ in track and field

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BOONTON - Cameron Horn still remembers the Morris County Championships two years ago. He was a Montville freshman and a relative newbie in the pole vault. Opening height was 10 feet, two above his personal best.

Horn called it “the ugliest jump I’ve had in my life,” but he cleared the height and a career was launched. He cleared 13-6 to win the county title and tie the Montville record a couple of weeks ago.

A former distance runner, Horn describes his chosen event as “falling with style,” like Buzz Lightyear in the “Toy Story” movies.

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Style

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Said Horn, “I like the rush from pole vault, and being high off the ground. My personal high is actually getting high in pole vault.”

Horn breaks the vault down into four steps: standards, or how far back the bar is; grips, how high the jumper holds the pole; steps, where you run from – usually five lefts or five rights – and the takeoff.

Randolph jumps coach Ken Morris looks at his athletes more philosophically, combining a sprinter’s speed, “grace like a gymnast or a ballerina,” the strength of a bodybuilder to hold the plant and take off, and patience, “wait, wait, take off and shoot over the bar.”

Gymnasts and wrestlers usually are potential vaulters for their body control and lack of fear of being upside down. But to Morris, one of four vaulting brothers, “Everybody’s a pole vaulter if they want to be.”

That might explain why he’s coached some of the best in Morris County, always trying to make his athletes better than he was. Morris has the No. 2 mark in Randolph High School, 15-3 behind the 15-7 of Garrett Wilson –

High school schedule

Tennis

NJSIAA singles at Mercer County Park
NJSIAA doubles at Veterans Park, noon

who taught him to jump in the mid-1990s.

Seniors Jackson Yeakel and Kenan Mitchell got to Randolph at the same time as Morris, a special education teacher, returned to his alma mater. They were quickly inspired by “the craziest thing” they could do in track and field, which reminded Mitchell of his skateboard-snowboard action sports childhood.

“It just doesn’t register with a normal brain. It’s something abnormal, strange. You just adapt,” Mitchell said. “It’s the only event where you’re risking your life. Let’s do it.”

Though Morris became a pole vaulter because he “was really bad at everything else,” the sport has grown in New Jersey in the past decade.

Clearing 9 feet was a big deal when Laura Schmidt tried the pole vault as a Clifton High School sophomore, but the Morris County girls record is 12-7 1/4 by Hanover Park alumna Nicole Pompei in ‘09. Jordan Pacheco of Morris Hills, who set the boys mark at 16-1, finished 11th at the NCAA Division II Championships last week.

“The sport hasn’t changed much, but

the interest has changed,” said Schmidt, the Roxbury girls coach who vaulted at Monmouth University. “Pole vault, all the technical events, take years to learn. It’s hard to remind them, ‘Don’t get discouraged when you’re not getting better.’”

Irene Park won the MCT last month even though Pequannock has no pole-vault pit – or even a pole. A transfer from Ridgewood after her freshman year, Park used to borrow equipment from Hudson Valley Flying Circus, where she trains. Eastern Christian gave her the pole she’s currently using, and Pequannock coach Rick Mullins has reached out to other schools to find a bigger one so Park can work on higher heights.

Morris County has a small, tightly interwoven pole vault community. Colin Feeney, a former Whippany Park quarterback, vaulted at East Stroudsburg and followed in Morris’ footsteps as a jumps assistant at his alma mater. Pat Rynearson, another former Whippany Park vaulter, is now the jumps coach at Governor Livingston.

“You’re not supposed to like your rivals, but,” said Yeakel, sharing a laugh with Mitchell and Horn and Montville vault coach Ken MacIver.

“You’re all equally crazy. It’s our own individual thing. It’s our own category.”

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