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Michael Mai **Mt. View Hammer Thrower Seeking First Olympic Berth**

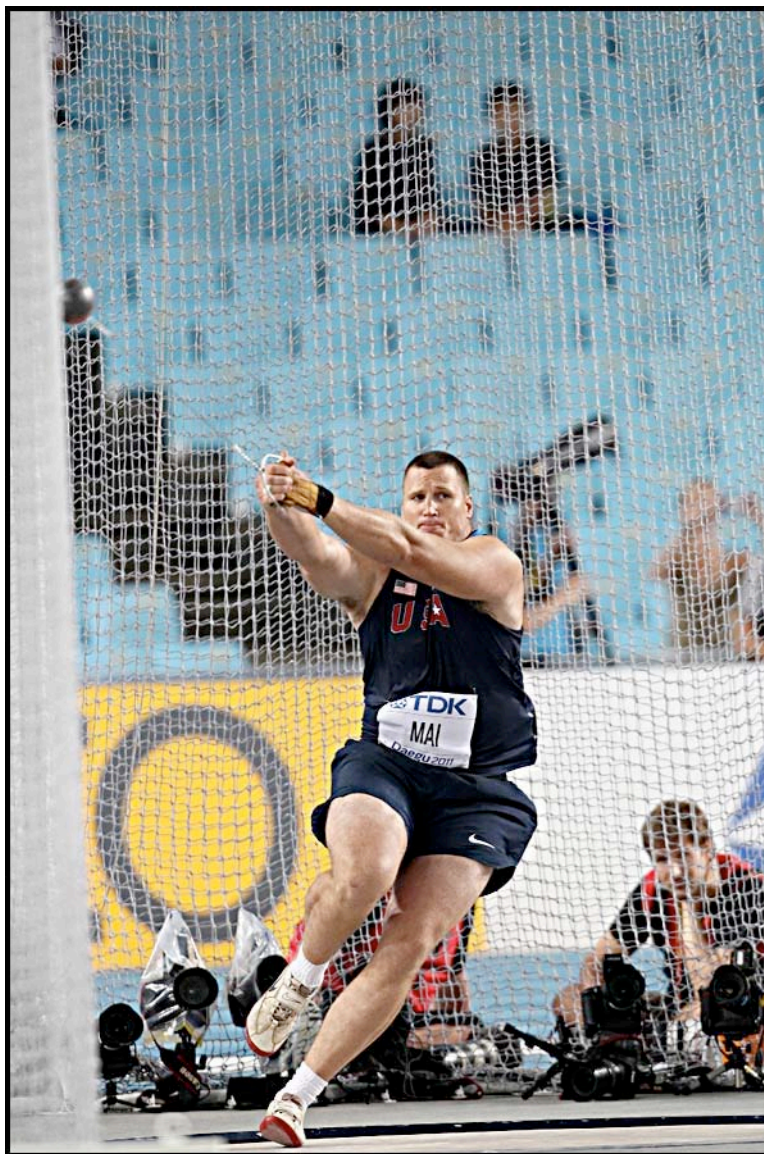


Photo Run / Victor Sailer photo

Mai at the 2011 World Outdoor Championships in South Korea

By Mark Winitz

Michael Mai (pronounced “May”) isn’t quite ready to put the hammer down. Not just yet. After all, the 34-year-old U.S. Army Major, who is a veteran of the hammer throw ring, has at least one more chance to wield the 16-pound hammer ball and cable and earn a spot on his first U.S. Olympic team. The Mountain View, Calif. resident and Pacific Association/USATF member will get that opportunity when he competes on the kickoff day of the U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials on Thursday, June 21, 2012.

Mai has felt strongly that he could fulfill his Olympic mission since 2002, when he was first selected for the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program (WCAP). Mai is a financial planning specialist in the Army. He is on his third tour of the WCAP, a program that provides outstanding soldier-athletes with the support and training to compete and succeed in national and international competitions leading to Olympic and Paralympic Games while maintaining a professional military career.

In April 2011, Mai finished a two-year stint as the Finance Commander of Fort Lewis Wash. and moved to Mountain View so he could be close to his longtime coach, Dave Swan, whom he started working with in 2002. Swan serves as chairman of the men’s hammer throw for USA Track & Field.

Since then, the 6’-4,” 255-pound Mai has tackled a specific assignment of preparing for the 2012 U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials, and, if he makes the U.S. team, the Olympic Games in London in August. Mai qualified for, and competed in, both the 2004 and 2008 U.S. Trials where he placed eighth and fifth respectively.

A second-place finish at the 2011 USA Outdoor Championships qualified Mai for his second U.S. World Outdoor Championships team after also making the squad in 2009. He failed to make the final round in both World Champs appearances. At last year’s Pan American Games, he earned a silver medal for Team USA. Earlier this year, he was the runner-up in the weight throw at the USA Indoor Championships.

Mai's personal best in the hammer throw is 76.28 meters/250 feet, 3 inches which he registered in 2008 when he was ranked No. 2 in the U.S. and No. 45 in the world. Last year, he was ranked second in the U.S. by *Track & Field News* between 2011 USA Outdoor Champion Kibwe Johnson and 2004 and 2008 Olympian A.G. Kruger.

Both Kruger and Johnson have met the Olympic "A" hammer throw standard of 78m/255-11, and are favored, along with Mai, to finish in the top three at the Trials. Although Mai had not achieved the Olympic "A" standard (he has the "B" standard), he's optimistic of a breakthrough performance and achieving the "A" standard at the Trials.

"I'm the kind of guy that when I go into a meet, I'm not going to throw what I've been throwing in practice," said Mai. "I'm usually going to throw two to three meters further. And, that's held up over a long period of time."

Mai tossed personal season bests at the 2009 and 2011 U.S. Outdoor Championships, making the U.S. World Championship teams. Plus, he has consistently thrown PRs in training sessions both last year and this year, and has three throws over 75 meters in competition so far this season. One of them came at the Pacific Association/USATF Track & Field Championships at a special throws competition on May 26 where Mai won the hammer competition with a 75.56m/ 247-11 throw.

"I think if at the Trials I throw 78 meters not only will I make the Olympic team, I think that it will win the Trials this year," Mai optimistically added.

Mai is uncertain about his athletic career after the U.S. Olympic Trials (and a possible ticket to the London Olympic Games if fortune has it). He is scheduled for deployment to Afghanistan towards the end of this year. He was deployed in Kuwait in 2006. Mai is deeply dedicated to a military career that, so far, has spanned 12 years.

Soon, Mai will also dedicate himself to a growing family. On July 30, 2011, he married high jumper Deirdre Mullen who is expecting the couple's first child in December and will forego her opportunity of competing in her first Olympic Trials.

"Initially, the goal was to both make the Olympic team," Deirdre said. "But sometimes God has another plan. We are just so excited."

Michael Mai grew up in Le Mars, Iowa as a member of an athletic family. He is the second youngest of six siblings, most of whom excelled in prep track and field. As a youngster, he worked on his grandparents' and neighbors' farms. He competed in football and track and field at Gehlen Catholic High School where he was the Iowa state prep discus throw champion in his Senior year and valedictorian for his class. Mai then attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and graduated in 2000. As a Cadet, he earned five letters in track and helped Army capture three Patriot League outdoor titles and two indoor crowns while competing in the 35-pound weight throw, discus, and hammer.

We caught up with Mai a couple of weeks before the Trials for an interview to learn more about him and his Trials expectations.

Question: So, you've had several deployments to the San Francisco Bay Area now with the Army's World Class Athletic Program with aspirations of making U.S. Olympic teams. It must be a favorable environment for you.

Mai: Yes, my coach, Dave Swan is here. we have good training facilities at Moffett (Federal) Airfield, and the weather is good for training outdoors year-round. And, the Bay Area has a rich hammer throwing tradition. Former Olympic hammer throwers live here: Ed Burke (1964, 1968, and 1984 Olympian), Ken Flax (1988, 1982), Kevin McMahon (1996, 2000), Ken Popejoy (1996), and Sweden's Tore Gustafsson (1988, 1992, 1996).

Question: Do you have a formal training group?

Mai: Not really. The closest person that I have for a training partner right now is Koji Murofushi (2004 Olympic hammer gold medalist and 2011 World Champion) from Japan. His coach (Tore Gustafsson) is here and he trains here part time. I've learned a lot from him, and he's a good friend. And there's always a few athletes coming and going. But, for me, it's really about forging a relationship with Coach Swan. In the past, when I've been based elsewhere, I'd send him videos and we'd analyze my technique. Now, he comes out to my practices two to three times a week around his full-time job in the semiconductor industry.

Question: Does the Army World Class Athlete Program allow you to train full time?

Mai: Yes, the goals of the program are to give us the opportunity to train and compete on a full-time basis and, of course, make national and international sports teams, mainly the U.S. Olympic or Paralympic teams. Still, you want to maintain your professional military career. Especially as a Major, I need to stay current in my field of financial management. So, there's a lot of online classes that I take. I'm also working towards certification in my field. And, you often do some promotional things for the U.S. Army.

In the (competitive) off season, I train four to six hours a day—throwing, lifting, or rehab. I like to do up to 40 or 50 throws, four or five days per week, and that takes time. Although this time of year I don't do a lot of weight lifting, in general I'll lift two to three days a week. I'll also do some sprinting, things like that. Plus, I've been lucky enough to be the volunteer assistant throws coach at San Jose City College for the past year and a half. I also like to keep my mind busy, too, by devoting a lot of time to reading. And, as a newlywed, my wife and I like to spend some time together.

Question: What's been your focus this year leading up to the Trials?

Mai: This year, being able to really focus on the hammer, I've been able to get in a lot more training than in the past three years when I was also a commander in a Finance Unit. So, I've put on a little weight and added a lot of strength.

The most important thing has been going after that Olympic "A" standard (78m/255-11), and making the technical changes so that when I get to the big meets I'm ready to hit the big throw. I've been a lot more consistent this year than I ever have in competition, but that big throw can happen any time. I feel like I really haven't hit that yet this year. In the past, I've been able to peak at the right time for the U.S. Championships, and that's what I'm looking forward to at the Trials.

In competition this year, I've seen a lot of the guys that I'll be up against at the Trials. In fact, I've beaten everybody out there at least once this year already, so I'm not worried about the competition. I'm just focusing on myself. Plus, I have the advantage of having thrown in big international meets like the 2009 World Championships in Berlin in front of 55,000 people, and I've competed against the best throwers in the world. When you get to the big meets, it's really about staying within yourself and doing what you've done to get there. I think a big mistake that some people make at the big meets is that they try to do something different, or do something special, to make it happen. That usually works against them.

Question: What are your main strengths in the hammer throw that you'll be taking with you to the Trials?

Mai: I think size is always important. When you're tall and you have long arms like I do, you naturally have a built-in extra radius. In the hammer throw, radius is extremely important. They say every extra inch of radius is another meter in the hammer when you throw. I also have an exceptional amount of strength that I got growing up and working on the farm. I bailed hay every summer since I was 12 years old which gave me a very strong back.

Also, I see myself as a technical thrower, rather than a thrower that relies on pure strength or speed. I try to get a lot of separation between my upper and lower body and I try to “catch” the hammer early and get more push on it.

On the mental side, I’ve been working with Bob Durrazo, a sports psychologist based in Redwood City, to help me stay relaxed in meets. I’m a technical person by nature, and sometimes get bogged down in details. So, for me, it’s really about getting out of my head and working on the emotional aspects that will help me relax, and really feel the ball, to get a good throw.

Question: How do you feel about the fact that, for the first time at the Trials, the men’s and women’s hammer competitions will be held separately from the main Trials venue—in this case at Nike World Headquarters near Beaverton, rather than in Eugene. And, the hammer will be the only event on the first day of competition.

Mai: When they first proposed the idea a year or so ago, I was kind of skeptical. But, now, I’m really happy about how they’re showcasing the event. The hammer is going to get more spectators now than we’ve probably ever had when the hammer competition was in Eugene, outside of the main stadium. (*Note: Meet organizers are planning for 5,000 spectators at the special *Hammer Time* competition kicking off the Trials.*)

In an ideal world, we’d be inside the stadium at Hayward Field in the middle of the meet. Frankly, I prefer the one-day-and-we’re-done format for the hammer that we’ll have this time. All 24 guys go up to Beaverton, nine guys make the final, and the hammer team is picked all in one day—rather than having a qualifying day and two days later having a final. It should give the hammer more exposure. Anything that helps with that is positive.

In track and field, fans understand running and jumping. Most people have been, at least, exposed to the discus and shot put, but not a lot of people have been exposed to the hammer throw. This year’s Olympic Trials is finally a chance for more people to see and learn about it. I think when folks get a chance to see the hammer, learn about it, and see

how fast athletes spin a 16-pound ball, and how far they throw it, it kind of blows their mind.
