

Day One, 2014 USA Track & Field Outdoor Championships

Unique Venue Showcases Shot Put Competition

By Mark Winitz

SACRAMENTO (June 25) — Five days of compelling competition kicked off at the 2014 USA Track & Field Outdoor Championships in Sacramento, Calif. with the Capitol Shot Put at a unique event venue on the west lawn in front of the state’s Capitol Building. An estimated 5,000 fans filled two grandstands on the perimeter of the shot put area, getting an up-close and personal view of the competitors. The shot put ring was set up on a slightly elevated concrete platform constructed so throws would be legal on the Capitol lawn’s uphill slant.

“I’m the one to blame for this venue, I guess,” joked USATF Pacific Association Executive Director **John Mansoor** who originated the idea for the State Capitol Building venue. “We’ve finished the California International Marathon here for 30 years, so I’m very familiar with the capitol grounds. I knew that the backdrop (of the capitol building dome) was beautiful and I knew that the grass field would lend itself extremely well, in terms of the length and width, to a shot put sector. So, it was a natural. “

Appropriately, two athletes with California ties—one native Californian, and one relatively new resident of the Golden State—responded with victories.

For four-time U.S. outdoor champion and U.S. women’s record holder **Michelle Carter**, who was born in San Jose, Calif. but has resided in Texas since an early age, these championships were a coming home of sorts.

“California is like home, I always get a lot of love and support out here and I really enjoy it,” Carter said.

Carter started the morning’s qualifying rounds by hitting the auto qualifying mark with a throw of (18.53 meters /60 feet, 9.50 inches) on her first attempt, Then, she led the evening session’s final from start to finish. Carter captured her fifth national crown outdoors and third in the last four years, with a bet toss of 19.45m/63-9.75 to take the title.

Felisha Johnson (Indianapolis, Ind.) surpassed 2012 Olympian Tia Brooks (Grand Rapids, Mich.) on her final throw of the evening, throwing a new personal best of 19.18m/62-11.25 to claim the silver medal. Brooks was third with her mark of 18.83m/61-9.50, a 2014 best.

“I’m always happy to push the bar from the beginning and keep pushing myself further,” Carter said. “If you set the bar high early on, everybody else will come up and push the bar even higher. I know Tia and Felisha are capable of throwing far, and are really coming up, so it’s great to have someone from your own country who’s able to push you. My goals for the remainder of the season are to just keep pushing further and see if I can get a PR.”

In the final of the men’s competition, 2012 Penn State graduate **Joe Kovacs** (Chula Vista, Calif.) claimed his first USATF outdoor national title after moving to the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista last January to work with coach Art Venegas. The former UCLA coach has guided world-class throwers such as John Godina and Suzy Powell.

On his fifth throw, Kovacs, the 2012 U.S. Olympic Trials fourth placer in the shot put, rocketed a 22.03m/72-3.50 for the victory. Kurt Roberts (Ashland, Ohio) and Reese Hoffa (Athens, Georgia) claimed the second and third places with best marks of 21.47m/70-5.25 and 20.78m/68-2.25 respectively.

“I’ve had consistent training all year with Art (Venegas)) so I knew that the big throws were there,” Kovacs said after the competition. “It just took a while to line everything up. I didn’t have the best arm strength or speed today, but my feet were underneath me and I was able to lift the ball. So, once I was able to do that I knew I was lined up. I think I have a bigger throw in me and I’ll have the rest of the season to do it.”

Kovacs, will now head over to Europe to compete in IAAF Diamond League events.

“It’s amazing,” Kovacs commented about the unique Sacramento shot put venue. It just shows you how entertaining the shot put can be. Most people don’t even know just how much the shot put weighs so they can come out and enjoy watching (up close) the ball going far. They can really get into it and behind you. And, in the thrower’s circle you get to stare at the giant (state capitol) dome and the American flag the whole time.”

California State Senator Jim Nielsen, who competed in the shot put at Fresno State University in the mid 1960s and was instrumental in coordinating the State Capitol Building setting for this event, threw out the honorary first toss of the day.

“We need to promote track and field and get it back on track,” Nielsen said. “This is a way to do it. I’m so glad to see shot putters getting the attention they deserve.”

Additional Californian Results:

Willy Irwin (Clovis, Calif., 19,17m/62-10.75) and Eric Werskey (Chula Vista, Calif., 19.05m/62-6) did not advance to the final.