

Cale Simmons Joins Placer/Sacramento Counties Team USA Pole Vault Olympians!



Rocklin High School graduate Cale Simmons competes during the men's pole vault event at the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials, Monday, July 4, 2016, in Eugene Ore. **Charlie Riedel** The Associated Press

By Bob Burns

EUGENE, Ore. – The pole vault attracts daredevil types, thrill-seekers like Cale Simmons. When he's not flying over crossbars set nearly 19 feet in the air, the Rocklin High School and Air Force Academy graduate enjoys motorcycling, rock climbing, skiing and skydiving.

Now, though, he's sticking strictly to crossbars.

"I've decided to be cautious for the next month," Simmons said. "Very cautious."

That's because pole-vault qualifying at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro is Aug. 13, and 1st Lt. Simmons needs to be at his spit-shine best. The magnitude of his second-place finish in the pole vault at the U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials left Simmons inundated by a flood of emotions – and hundreds of congratulations on Facebook – that hadn't subsided several days later.

“When I clinched a spot on the team, I remember thinking, oh my God, this could change my life,” Simmons said in a phone interview from Colorado Springs. “This is uncharted territory for me. It’s kind of overwhelming.”

Twelve months ago, Simmons was stationed at Ramstein AFB in Germany, assigned an Air Force contracting unit. He was two years removed from a successful collegiate career in which he vaulted a school-record 18-4³/₄ and tied for fifth at the 2012 NCAA Championships. While in Germany, Simmons tried to stay in shape, “but it was tough with all the schnitzels and beer,” he said.

The Air Force’s World Class Athlete Program gave Simmons a chance to scratch his vaulting itch. The program is designed to give elite Air Force athletes the opportunity to train full-time for the Olympics. Simmons was accepted and began training in earnest in September.

“He’s been saying ever since he came back that he’d make the Olympic team,” said Scott Steffan, Air Force’s pole-vault coach. “He didn’t have a lot of time to get ready.”

To compete in next month’s Olympics, athletes in each event need to have met an exacting minimum qualifying standard. The qualifying window opened May 1, 2015, and shuts July 11. The Olympic standard in the pole vault is 5.70 meters, or 18 feet, 8¹/₂ inches. A top-three finish at the U.S. Olympic Trials doesn’t guarantee an Olympic spot unless the athlete has reached or exceeded the standard.

It wasn’t until June 26 at a last-chance meet in Denver that Simmons cleared the standard, exceeding it by two centimeters with a career-best vault of 18-9¹/₄.

“It was a huge relief to get the standard before the Trials,” Simmons said. “That meant I could just concentrate on getting in the top three.”

In the Olympic Trials final on July 4, Simmons was tied for third following second-attempt clearances at 18-0¹/₂ and 18-4¹/₂. As the first of the seven remaining vaulters to attempt 18-6¹/₂, he knew he’d greatly enhance his position by clearing the height on his first try.

Simmons sailed over cleanly in his red, white and blue socks, cheered on by his father, mother and two younger sisters in Hayward Field’s east grandstand.

“I knew it was huge, but I didn’t put it together that I had made the team,” Simmons said.

Sam Kendricks, the eventual winner at 19-4³/₄, also cleared 18-6¹/₂ on his first attempt. One by one, the other vaulters missed once, twice, three times. The worst Simmons could finish at that point was third.

“You almost don’t want to watch, and you don’t want to celebrate because I’m friends with all of the other guys,” Simmons said. “You’d be celebrating at their expense.”

Simmons called his three unsuccessful tries at 18-8¹/₄ the toughest of his life.

“The pole vault requires a lot of concentration,” Simmons said. “Going down the runway, knowing I’d already made the team, I had a million things running through my mind. I was trying to focus with the biggest smile on my face.”

There must be something in the Placer County water that fuels great pole vaulters. Stacy Dragila, the former world record holder and 2000 Olympic champion, is from Auburn. Becky Holliday, a Penryn native, made the 2008 Olympic team, and former NCAA champion Scott Roth is from Granite Bay. Just across the county line, two-time Olympian Derek Miles attended Bella Vista High School.

The Simmons household alone has produced older sister Rachel, third on the Air Force Academy’s all-time list at 12-10¾, and Cale’s identical twin Rob, an 18-0½ performer in 2013.

“I could not tell them apart during their freshman and sophomore years,” Steffan said. “One day, something clicked and I could tell which was which, but for two years I just called them “Rob-Cale.”

Rob Simmons was preparing to fly a C-17 to Qatar when his twin brother made the Olympic team.

“He tried to call me when I was in drug testing, and I said, ‘Can I call you back?’” Cale said. “He was proud. He’s kind of retired (from the pole vault) right now, but he’d love to do it again. When you see an identical twin do something, you want to do it, too.”

The twins qualified for the California state high school meet in 2009 and would have contended for the title had they not chosen to attend their graduation ceremony.

“You only graduate from high school once,” Cale explained at the time.

At 25, Simmons should be entering his prime as a vaulter, but he will need to fulfill the remaining two years of his Air Force commitment following the Olympics.

“He’s a terrific young man,” said Ralph Lindeman, Air Force’s head track coach since 1989. “Anyone would be proud to having him serve the United States of America.”

When he last spoke to Rob, Cale started hatching a plan that contradicted his pledge to be super-cautious.

“Rob, you’ve go figure out a way to fly me to Rio in a C-17,” Cale said. “I could jump out and land in the stadium. Wouldn’t that be awesome?”

Recalling the conversation, Cale laughed heartily.

“They’d never me do it,” he said. “They only let you do that in Special Ops.”