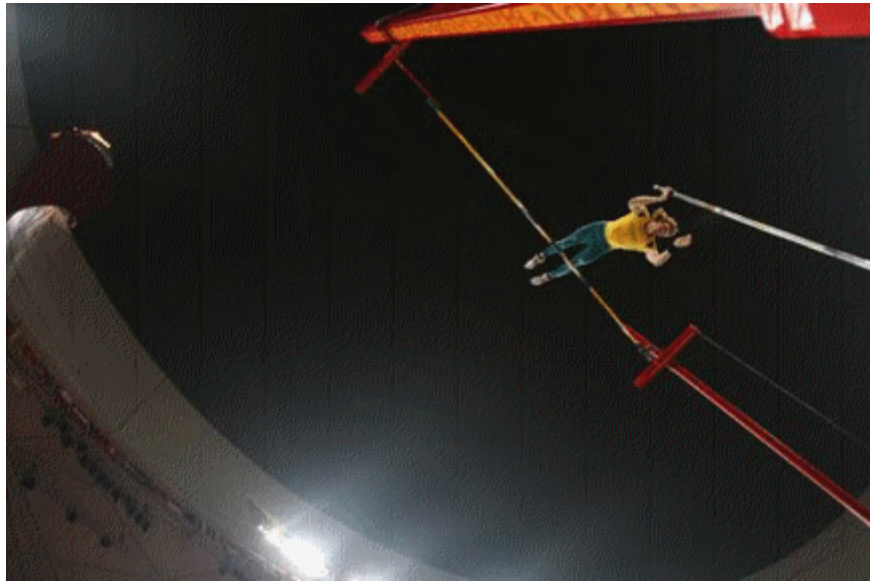


Hooker in pole position after hypnotist sends him to leap

Jessica Halloran | The Melbourne AGE August 22, 2008



Learning to let go. Australian pole-vault medal hope Steve Hooker's career almost didn't get off the ground until he learned to get over the fears inside his head.

Photo: Tim Clayton

STEVE HOOKER has been hypnotised to cure his pole-vaulting fears and is ready to jump for Olympic gold tonight. His journey to the top has had its speed bumps, and sessions with a hypnotherapist fixed his fragile mental state that almost caused him to quit.

Another obstacle out of the 26-year-old's way is former gold favourite and two-time world champion Brad Walker. The American bombed in Wednesday night's qualification not clearing a height at the Bird's Nest. Hooker's biggest threat is now young Russian star Evgeniy Lukyanenko, who cleared 6.01 metres coming into Beijing. Hooker's best is 6m this year.

"I was looking forward to the battle between the three of us," Hooker said. "But at the same time Brad is a big threat, so in some way I've got to be happy that he's not going to be there. It's one less thing to think about. I can just focus on what I'm going to do and hopefully jump one more bar than Yevgeniy does."

With their form, the Olympic record of 5.95m could go. It's hard to believe the man who has eclipsed the magic 6m mark and threatens to break the world record, was throwing

tantrums in training five years ago. For a two-year period, up until 2003, Hooker just "couldn't jump".

"I would run through a lot and not take off and it got to the point, by the end of it I thought about giving it in," he said. "It was so mentally draining going to training not knowing if I would be able to jump or not.

"I was throwing poles, cracking tantrums, I was in a miserable bad mood. Your whole life, it really brings it down when it's really what you want to do and you can't do it just because it's not clicking in your brain. A lot of people's careers end with this sort of thing but I just really worked hard. I tried a million different things to try and get around it."

One of the things that worked for the Olympic gold medal favourite was hypnotism, as well as some visualisation techniques, conducted by his sports psychologist.

"It's not like she had me walking around like acting like a chicken or anything," Hooker said. "It was more getting really relaxed, so your subconscious comes to the forefront, and just having her run through scripts about what things I needed to focus on.

"I would talk to her at the start of the session and say, 'I want to talk about lowering the pole vault in my last couple of steps and jumping off the ground.' I would tell her the cues I wanted to work on, so she'd work it into the things that she was saying while I was under hypnosis.

"I felt like that kind of stuff was cool. The more you do it the more you realise pole vault is mental. Just having any sort of mental stimulation, where you are thinking deeply about what you're doing, helps."

Hooker said his best jumps came after a break in training. "When I'm not jumping all I can think about is jumping," he said. "I do like a million jumps in my head every day, and when I get back my body knows how to do it better than I did before the break. All these things made me realise how important the mental side of the preparation is."

Fellow Australian Paul Burgess failed to qualify for the final, with a rocky lead-up. That he was recovering from an Achilles operation did not help his hopes.

Hooker was shaky in qualifying, leaving his qualification until the last jump, clearing 5.65m. "I had one bad jump out there and two really solid jumps. I know I can replicate and I'm on the sort of poles I know I can jump really high on," he said. "I'm still really confident, and I'm looking forward to Friday big time."