
NCAA WEST REGIONAL TRACK & FIELD

Trojan's second shot counts: USC's Noah Bryant is the NCAA's leader in his event after an accident threatened his career

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When USC's Noah Bryant steps into the shot put ring at the West Regional Championships at Hayward Field on Saturday, he'll do so as the nation's leading performer in that event.

The 6-foot-1, 250-pound Bryant set his PR of 67 feet, 5 1/2 inches in a dual meet against UCLA last month. His winning mark helped the Trojans beat the Bruins for the first time in his five-year career.

Bryant, who has already collected NCAA Indoor and Pac-10 titles this season, has little to gain at the regional meet.

Only bad things can happen to elite athletes.

But it's a necessary step on the road to the NCAA Outdoor Track & Field Championships in Sacramento, June 6-9, and the redshirt senior has learned to take nothing for granted in the sport he has grown to love.

He knows how quickly it can all be taken away.

Two years ago, in an early April meet at Northridge, Calif., Bryant was competing in his secondary event, the hammer throw, when he lost his balance and fired the 16-pound metal ball into the protective chain-link cage.

In a split second, the ball ricocheted directly back at Bryant.

It struck him flush in the face, caving in his right eye socket and shattering facial bones in 14 different places. Luckily, Bryant's instincts enabled him to raise his right hand to slightly deflect the speeding ball.

If he had not done so, doctors later confirmed, the blow could have been fatal.

"I got my right hand up just enough," Bryant said. "Without that, a half-inch away, it would have blinded me or killed me."

Instead, the frightening incident lit Bryant's competitive fire.

He became a changed man.

Once he recovered sufficiently to resume training, both mentally and physically, he altered his diet and dropped nearly 50 pounds, which made him quicker and more explosive in the shot put ring.

"When you go through something like that," Bryant said, "you realize that you might never throw again, or even die. ... In the long run, it helped me out. It's not like I didn't work hard before, but something went off for me, and now, whenever I go out there, I do

all that I can while I'm able."

The results are obvious.

Bryant claimed his first NCAA title at the indoor meet last March and blew away a talented field at the Pac-10 championships to win by nearly four feet - 66-7 to 63-7 1/2 - over teammate William Denbow.

He is the clear favorite to cap his collegiate career by adding an NCAA outdoor title to his r<142>sum<142> in June.

Bryant is the school record-holder for a team that has produced three Olympic gold medalists in the shot put - Dallas Long, Parry O'Brien (twice) and Wilbur Thompson.

"Before the accident," USC throws coach Dan Lange said. "Noah was a very talented guy, succeeding to modest levels. But he was not the most disciplined guy. Once he realized that his sport could be taken away at any moment, he reached back and became more focused and more disciplined. ... He's a different person now and a different athlete."

The two-day regional meet - which opens at 1 p.m. today - requires a top-five finish in individual events, and a top-three performance in relays, to earn automatic spots in the NCAA championships.

Those who place in the top 12 are eligible for at-large positions when competitive fields are determined based on a descending order list of season-best marks.

The 10,000 and multi-events are not contested at regionals.

Bryant is one of several athletes from the West region - which consists of Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington - currently ranked No. 1 in the nation among Division I collegians.

The others are UCLA's Greg Garza in the discus, Oregon's Galen Rupp in the 10,000 and Arizona's Jake Arnold in the decathlon.

On the women's side, the list features California's Alysia Johnson in the 800, Weber State's Lindsey Anderson in the 3,000 steeplechase, UCLA's Rhonda Watkins in the long jump, Stanford's Erica McLain in the triple jump, UO's Rachel Yurkovich in the javelin, WSU's Diana Pickler in the heptathlon and ASU's Sara Stevens in the shot put and discus.

USC, which has won the men's West Regional title in each of the past two years, plans to train through the meet, but Bryant and his teammates won't be shy when their names are called.

"It's a weird mind-set," Lange said. "Especially when you're one of the favorites. You have nowhere to go but down. But we don't train for 80 percent throws. We train for maximum effort."

Bryant's main goal is simply to qualify for NCAAs. And surprisingly enough, he doesn't mind the regional concept.

"I like it," he said. "Hayward Field is my favorite place to throw in the country, the actual ring, and the atmosphere that all the fans create. ... There's not a lot of pressure on me. My main goal is to get the first one in and qualify for nationals. After that, I have five throws to go for it."

And for Bryant, there is no holding back.

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