

Steve Smith

Most athletes start their career at school sports. Not so for Steve; he has his sister Sharon to thank. She was a sprinter with Liverpool Harriers and he used to tag along with her to Kirkby stadium on Club training nights, until one night he decided to have a go at running. He went on to become a world class High Jumper, Liverpool Harriers' youngest ever male international, and our first Olympic medallist.

Steve was born on March 29th 1973, brought up in Norris Green, and attended De La Salle school. He was 12 years old when he joined LHAC, becoming part of Club Coach John Owens' junior running group. By his own admission, he was just an ordinary club runner, whose only claim to fame in those early years was to finish sixth in the Boys race at the Club's Cross-Country Championships. But being in the right place, at the right time, was to change young Steve's life in a big way.

During the winter of 1987, Club field events coach Mike Holmes wanted to work at High Jump with one of his protégés, multi-eventer Jackie Kinsella, but the area was occupied by a 14-year-old skinny, ginger-haired kid. Mike figured out the best way of dealing with this irritation was to offer to coach him for a while, with the intention of sending the lad off to do something else, so Mike and Jackie could use the facilities. At that moment 'an Olympian was born'!

Steve first appeared on the national scene when he won the U15 Boys' title for 1987, at the English Schools Championships in Birmingham. His winning height of 1.84 metres was routine for that age group and gave little hint of what was to come. As a first year U17 he improved to 1.99 metres, very good progress but not startling. His final U17 year saw him move on substantially, to 2.09 metres, again very good, but only second in the UK rankings, as his great age group rival, Brendan Reilly, had jumped a prodigious 2.15 metres that year.

Steve continued to grow steadily and, whilst his final stature of 1.85 metres is not tall for a top class High Jumper, his progress at the event certainly accelerated. **On 7th June 1990, he secured his first GB Senior International selection** (before any Junior recognition) and competed against Finland at just 17 years, 2 months, 8 days. He finished third that day, with a leap of 2.15 metres, ahead of the other GB representative, but was soon to go far higher. In the August, he defeated established Senior internationals Geoff Parsons and Charles Austin (USA) in an invitation meeting at Gateshead, with a magnificent 2.25 metres. His progress, from 2.09 metres at 16 to 2.25 metres at 17, was unprecedented in UK High Jump history.

On 1st February of the following year, 1991, at an Indoor 'Jump to Music' meeting in Wuppertal, Germany, whilst still aged 17, he raised his best to 2.27 metres (a little over 7ft 5ins). That performance earned the youngster selection for the **Senior** World Indoors Championships at Seville in Spain, where he jumped 2.15 metres in the qualifying round.

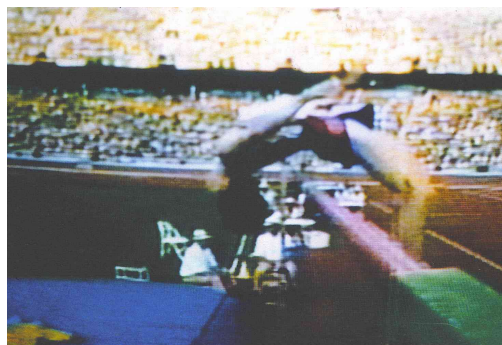


'A' Levels now beckoned and Steve was banished from training for a month so as to focus on his exams. Nonetheless, and despite being short of training, he was once more selected for the GB Senior team, this time at Crystal Palace in the first match ever to feature the re-unified Germany (East and West coming together). On a cool evening in early June, he won with 2.28 metres, which was a new UK U20 Record. But the climax of his year was competing in the **European Junior Championships, at Thessaloniki in August, where he not only cleared 2.29 metres, but took the gold** (as you can see), with one Junior year to come. In all, he competed for the GB Seniors on six occasions in 1991, whilst still aged 17 & 18.

1991 had been a great year for Steve, but 1992 was to be even better. He was now consistently clearing 2.25 metres and winning most of his competitions. A couple of weeks before the AAA, he took the Northern title at Blackpool, with his season's best so far of 2.28 metres. This was an important outcome, because 2.28 metres was the Olympic Games qualifying height and opportunities were running out. At the AAA, which was the Olympic Trials for the GB team, he and another world class Junior, Australian Tim Forsyth, were the only competitors to clear 2.31 metres but Steve won on count-back. Not only was this a new PB, but the victory made his selection for the Olympic Games a certainty - and he was still a Junior aged just 19!

The 1992 Olympic Games were held in Barcelona. To qualify for the High Jump final, competitors had to clear 2.29 metres or be in the top twelve (or equal twelfth). Only two jumpers achieved the height; one of them was Steve! Clearly hopes for a good result in the final were high, with an outside chance of a medal, but it did not go to plan. All 14 competitors cleared every height up to 2.24 metres; at 2.28 metres there was the first elimination. It was all very close. Six of the fancied jumpers, including Steve, passed 2.28 metres, to try to get the edge in the event of a tie.

The bar went up to 2.31 metres - equal to Steve's lifetime best. Three more were eliminated. Steve had two failures at that height and had to decide what to do. Even if he cleared this height on his third jump, the failures could count against him later. He felt that he was capable of a height above this one and so he chose to gamble, keeping his final attempt for the next height in the quest for a possible medal. It was probably the right choice. All ten remaining athletes attempted 2.34 metres, but only five managed it: Steve was not among them. No-one cleared any higher, so the result was decided on count-back, with victory for Javier Sotomayor of Cuba. Steve's gamble left him in 12th overall, with two guys he had beaten previously ahead of him: Tim Forsyth was one of three tying for Bronze and Charles Austin was equal 8th. However, Steve was closer to the medals than the results show and he was only a fraction away from glory. Have a look at the photo of that attempt at the Gold Medal winning height of 2.34m - truly huge - Steve's heels only just clipping the bar. Disappointing, but not bad for a Junior!



Clearly Steve was among the favourites for the World Junior title to be contested late in the September of that year. In the meantime he cleared 2.30 metres to win at Sheffield and, competing for once at U20 level, finished second in the Long Jump (!) for GB against France and Spain, with a wind-assisted 7.52 metres backed up by a legal 7.51 metres.

In the 1992 World Junior Championships in Seoul, Korea, he became Champion and set a new world Junior record of 2.37 metres, beating his 'nemesis' Forsyth.



Steve had to clear PBs of 2.33 and 2.35 as well as the mighty 2.37 metres. His attempts at 2.40 metres were, understandably, rather weary! That winning height was significantly higher than the 2.34 metres at which the Olympics had been won, allowing him to look forward confidently to medals in future Olympics and World Championships. It was handy for Steve to have coach Mike Holmes was close at hand, because Mike travelled out to Korea as jumps coach to the GB Junior Team and was able to share this special occasion.

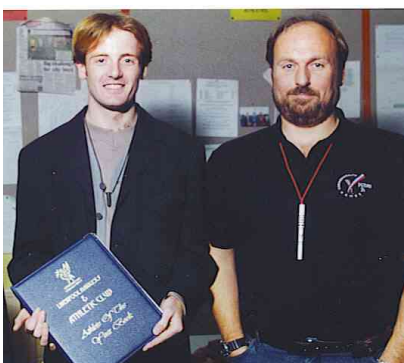
There were further medals and records in 1993. Steve won bronze at the World Indoor Championships in Toronto and also at the outdoor event in Stuttgart, the latter behind world record-holder Sotomayor (Cuba) and Partyka (Poland). The height on both occasions was **2.37 metres, so he had claimed the UK records both indoors and outdoors.** That autumn, Steve set out to study Physical Education at Loughborough College, but it only lasted a term before he took time out to concentrate on his high jumping career. He beat Dalton Grant's UK Indoor 'All-Comers' record, clearing 2.36 metres, and was voted 'Field Athlete of the Year'.

1994 saw Steve end the indoor season with a 2.38 metres clearance at Wuppertal - yet another UK record (still standing some 20 years later), and a height which would prove to be the best of his career. Indeed it is still top of the Commonwealth all-time list in 2012. But he had acquired a number of nagging injuries. Neil Black, the GB physio, cleared them sufficiently for him to share the Silver medal position with Partyka at the European Championships at Helsinki in the August, beaten by Steinar Hoen of Norway. Then Steve rushed out to Canada, for the Commonwealth Games in Victoria where, as a late arrival and still jet-lagged, he again had to be content with a silver, clearing 2.32 metres but losing the gold in a nail-biting jump-off with Forsyth, ahead of team-mate Geoff Parsons who took bronze. It was a tough few days, which showed Steve's desire to represent his country.

The 1995 World Championships in Gothenburg were remarkable in many ways - not least because Jonathan Edwards broke the World Record when winning the Triple Jump with 18.29 metres. Steve missed out on the medals, but his performance was also remarkable in its own way. His ankle was giving him so much pain that he needed a pain-killing injection to jump at all. So as to ration his jumps, Steve opted for a massive opening height of 2.29 metres, which he cleared first time! He went on to clear 2.35 metres, the same height as bronze, losing on count-back. A truly courageous effort.

In the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, the 23-year-old took bronze with 2.35 metres, becoming the first Liverpool Harrier to win an Olympic medal in the Club's history. It was also Great Britain's first Olympic high jump medal since Con Leahy's silver in 1908. Having gone into the games after a hard season, including the GB trials and the busy Grand Prix circuit, plus having to take antibiotics the week before for a chest infection, it was a job well done. Coach Mike was at hand to support him, especially as Steve wasn't a 'morning man' and the qualifying rounds were at 9am in the morning. Certainly very valuable work was done at the GB Olympic holding camp in Tallahassee, Florida.

Overall it was an outstanding effort and, when what he had achieved finally sank in, Steve did a 'Pat Cash', running into the crowd to his family and friends who had been there for him, dedicating his medal to them. They had all saved up for twelve months to witness his great moment.



Steve's records speak for themselves, in terms of the heights he cleared, the titles he won, and being the first Liverpool Harrier to win a major world Games medal. But he would be the first to tell you that Mike, his coach and adviser, played a major part in his success.

Having been a successful field event competitor himself, with our Club record of British League appearances, Mike's vast experience has helped him become one of the most respected coaches in the country, including being part of the GB Team set-up.

Steve eventually left Liverpool, moving to live and train in Birmingham. He was forced to retire through injury in 1999; limping off the fan at the World Championships in Seville, never to jump again. He had reached the top of his sport, winning four AAA titles, plus medals at all the major games, and he had captained his country. He has since become a successful businessman and sports broadcaster and, as a father of two, is currently living in Formby.