

Inspired by his brother and buoyed by his wife, vaulter is tapping into his potential

by Don Norcross

Russ Buller was having a heart-to-heart talk with his younger brother, Jordan. A former high school all-state quarterback, Jordan was struggling academically in college.

Russ told his brother he was letting an opportunity slip away, that he needed to re-focus and apply himself, in the classroom and on the football field.

Jordan listened during the drive in their Lake Charles, La., hometown, then turned the pressure back in Russ' face.

"What about you?" Jordan said. "You're too good to be doing this."

OPENING THE VAULT - Russ Buller coached his wife, Canadian pole-vaulter Dana Ellis-Buller, to a sixth-place finish at the 2004 Athens Games. Now he has his sights on a gold medal - for himself - at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. CNS photo by Scott Linett.

A world-class pole vaulter, Russ essentially had put his athletic career on hold, becoming the head track coach at McNeese State after getting married a year earlier, squeezing in vaulting when time permitted.

Weeks after the emotional conversation, Jordan died in a car accident. On a rainy evening, one of Jordan's friends lost control on a curve, the passenger side of the car striking a pole. The young men were on their way to a local club to pick up friends who were too drunk to drive.

The driver survived.

Of his brother's 2004 death, Russ said, "It was a wake-up call for me. It made me step outside myself and realize what I had and what I was about to lose."

Buller, now 28, quit coaching and moved into the Olympic Training Center at Chula Vista, Calif., in March 2005.

Deciding that last year was a fork-in-the-road season - "If it didn't work out, it was time to move on," he said - Buller cleared 19 feet for the first time in five years, winning the USA Outdoor Championships with a vault

of 19 feet, one-quarter inch.

Among the vaulters Buller defeated at nationals: Tim Mack and Toby Stevenson, the defending Olympic gold and silver medalists, respectively.

"Before, my goal was just to make the national team," Buller said. "Now I know I could be the next Olympic gold medalist."

Buller is as Southern as country-fried steak and grits, his drawl graceful and rhythmic. One of his favorite memories with his brother: passing time fishing. Buller's good looks have translated into modeling for print ads and a Bowflex TV commercial.

He's so athletically talented he held his high school record in the 100 and 200 meters and frustrated his baseball coach because he gave up the sport to sprint down a runway and hang upside down.

His wife, Canadian Dana Ellis-Buller, pole vaults and tied for sixth at the 2004 Olympics. The couple splits time between Lake Charles and the Olympic Training Center.

Russ coached Dana for some time, which created husband/wife, coach/athlete conflicts. There was the time weeks before the 2004 Olympics when Dana was training and complaining about the wind.

"I was kind of being mental, so to speak," said Dana.

"Listen," Russ said, "you're being a wussy."

When Dana's whining continued, Russ said, "Fine, if you're going to be this way, find yourself another coach before the Olympics."

"Yeah," replied Dana, "but I can't find myself another husband."

Husband/wife, coach/athlete patched their differences and Russ was in Athens with Dana.

It was a bittersweet experience for Russ. Here he was at track and field's marquee stage, the only time most Americans care about track and field, proud of his wife's accomplishments, but frustrated he was only a coach, not a participant.

Dana stuck around for the Closing Ceremonies. Russ left before the men's competition.

Then came the talk with Jordan and a family's heartache.

Buller can be gracious and friendly. So, too, he can be animated and emotional, not shy about expressing his opinion, as when sharing his frustration at how slow the federal government has been to supply relief in Hurricane Rita-ravaged Lake Charles.

"Families have been devastated," he said. "Cars are still strewn alongside the road."

When he talks about Jordan, Russ' voice turns soft.

"Not a day goes by that I don't think about him," Russ said. "Before, it was sadness. Now, it's mostly memories, reminding myself I'm lucky enough to be on this Earth. When I'm in a beautiful setting, I think about him. I'm very, very grateful and thankful for being here."

Russ' coach and friend, Ty Sevin, calls Buller "one of the most grounded people I know."

Adds Sevin, "He's very cultured, having traveled the world, to Europe, lived in San Diego, modeled in New York. But when he comes back home, he fits in as one of the Southern boys, eating crawfish, fishing."

Buller's goals: the American pole vault record (19-9 1/4, a significant 8 1/2 inches better than his personal record) and an Olympic gold medal.

"His brother's death made him reflect on life and put his priorities straight," Sevin said. "He understands God gave him a gift in the pole vault. He's going to do everything to make sure that's the focus of his life. That, and

his family and friends."

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