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Unlikely Savior Rallies American Track Team

By [LYNN ZINSER](#)

BEIJING — The United States [track and field](#) team's savior draped an American flag over her shoulders Monday night and ran a victory lap wearing the biggest smile she could muster, a most unlikely heroine in an event that has been an American afterthought for decades.

Stephanie Brown Trafton took her place at the head of the American team with a surprising gold medal in the discus, the first by an American woman since 1932 and the only medal of any color since 1984. Hers was a dream spawned when she was 4 years old and watching the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics at her home in Arroyo Grande, Calif. Back then, she wanted to be a gymnast.

Now 6-foot-4 and 225 pounds at age 28, Brown Trafton has found a more fitting route to Olympic glory.

"I want to meet [Mary Lou Retton](#), so please, someone hook me up," Brown Trafton said. "She was my idol. I had a leotard like hers but I got too big to be a gymnast."

After three mostly miserable nights of an Olympic track meet, the American team had won only three medals, a silver by shot-putter Christian Cantwell and bronzes by Walter Dix in the 100 meters and Shalane Flanagan in the 10,000. With the Jamaicans suddenly dominating the sprints, this meet started to feel like an American slide.

Brown Trafton not only halted that, she sparked a bit of a turnaround. By the end of the night, three American men swept the medals in the 400-meter hurdles and the pole vaulter Jenn Stuczynski snared a silver medal.

So by the time Angelo Taylor, Kerron Clement and Bershawn Jackson soared across the finish line in the 400 hurdles and celebrated in one big American-flag hug, the mood around the team had lifted considerably.

"I knew America was struggling a bit but I knew we could be the heart of the team that could bring it back," Jackson said.

The 400-meter hurdles is a traditional American event, built on the shoulders of runners like Edwin Moses, who won gold medals at the 1976 and 1984 Olympics and would have been favored to win a third had the United States attended the 1980 Games in Moscow. But while there has been an American sweep of the Olympic medals five times, it has not happened since 1960.

Taylor was not the most likely of the three competitors to lead them over the line. He is 29 and his life has taken several downturns since he won the gold medal in this event in the 2000 Sydney Olympics. In 2004, he sustained stress fractures in both his shins, did not make the finals in the Athens Olympics and was

forced to take a year off to heal. He went to work as an electrician in Atlanta. In 2006, he was given three years' probation after pleading guilty to contributing to the delinquency of two under-age girls.

Just weeks ago he found out he would lose the gold medal he won in Sydney in the 4x400-meter relay after his teammate Antonio Pettigrew admitted to doping.

"I'm happy right now," Taylor said. "This replaces all that. I feel like it replaces that medal. After eight years, to win after everything I've gone through, I'm so happy."

The three Americans were openly talking about sweeping this event after the United States trials. They qualified for the final as the three strongest runners. Clement was also coming off a world championship last year and Jackson had won in 2005. But it was Taylor crossing the finish line well ahead, in 47.25 seconds, his personal best. Clement ran a 47.98.

Jackson had to fight hardest for the medal, losing his rhythm early in the race and fighting at the end to hold off Jamaica's Danny McFarlane.

"We were all great candidates for the gold medal but the best guy won and that was Angelo tonight," Jackson said.

In the pole vault, the best woman definitely won as the competition became another example of the domination by Russia's Yelena Isinbayeva. She won the gold with two jumps and then topped her own world record by clearing 16 feet 8 inches on her third try.

Stuczynski, in her first Olympics, cleared 15 feet 9 inches for the silver. She said she hoped to catch up to Isinbayeva in the coming years. Stuczynski was playing basketball in college when she first tried the pole vault in 2004.

"I think I just need more experience," Stuczynski said. "In '04 I was a 12-foot pole vaulter. She's been in the Olympics before. She's been to the world championships. She's jumped for a decade longer than me. It's just a matter of time."

For sheer audacity, all those American medalists took a backseat to Brown Trafton.

The women's throwing events have been devoid of American contenders. They are usually dominated by Eastern Europeans, while Americans struggle just to make the finals in major international meets. The last American medal came courtesy of Leslie Deniz in 1984, the Games that were boycotted by the Eastern Bloc. The last American to win was Lillian Copeland in the first Los Angeles Games, in 1932.

"I hope this gives all the kids in high school and college the confidence that they can medal in the Olympics," Brown Trafton said. "Myself, I have a great physique to be a thrower, long and lean. I'm going to get stronger and hopefully I'll stay injury free."

Brown Trafton is a bit of a throwback to the Olympics of old. For one, she has a job, working as a project manager for Sycamore Environmental Consulting in Sacramento. She trains in almost complete anonymity. She did not even with the United States trials, finishing third.

Her golden moment, though, came at just the right time for an American team that needed her badly.

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