Attention Worries Vaulter

By JIM MCDONALD
Sports Writer

Irene Speker is the first member of an exclusive club of women who have leaped higher than eight feet. The Virginia Tech senior set a new women's world pole vault record of eight feet 4 1/2 inch last weekend at the Mason Dixon Games in Louisville, Kentucky. She cleared seven feet seven inches on her first attempt of the competition to break the old mark of seven feet six inches.

Surprisingly, Speker, who has gone as high as nine feet in practice, wasn't very elated about her accomplishment. "It's nice to get the record, but I feel kind of guilty over all the attention I've received," she said. "I don't feel like eight feet 4 1/2 inch is very high. I haven't worked that hard."

The athlete, who took up the event at the beginning of this year, feels she can be successful at ten-feet by springtime. If she can attain that height, according to her, then she will have accomplished something worthwhile.

"It would feel like more of an achievement if I can top ten-feet because I'll have to work really hard to get that high. I value the things that come harder," she said.

A star runner, Speker holds Virginia Tech records for women in eight events including the 1500 and 3000 meter runs, the mile, and the indoor mile relay.

The Hokies have been the beneficiaries of her accomplishments for the small investment of $500. Since women's cross country is a club sport the only funding the team receives is from University resources. It gets minimal help, financial or otherwise, from the Athletic Association, which supports all varsity sports substantially better than the university is able to help club sports.

Because of her success and the attention it has brought, Speker and her teammates are hoping the Athletic Association will have to recognize their team, considering it in the same capacity as women's basketball, swimming, and tennis which were converted to varsity teams this year.

Such action would, among other things, provide them with a full time coach and allow them to schedule more meets.

"I bet the Athletic Association is really fuming because of the record. They don't acknowledge we exist. They're probably bitter because they haven't recognized us as a varsity sport," Speker said.

"We thought we should have been made varsity along with women's tennis, swimming and basketball. Now maybe we'll get it. The team feels like the Athletic Association will have to recognize us now," she added.

She said the appointment of Jo Kafer as Athletic Director for Women's Sports has been, to the present time, no help in bettering her team's situation.

Women have been pole vaulting in meets for only three years. Speker said she decided to take up the event because of the challenge involved in mastering a new skill, the excitement involved and for the possibility of establishing a world standard.

"I wanted to try it just to be able to do it and because of the possibility in setting the record," she said. "I'm really excited about everything that's happened. It doesn't seem possible. Until three years ago girls weren't allowed to do vault because it was considered too dangerous. Now all the girls on our team are anxious to try it."

The problem for Speker in relation to her new event is that most meets still do not hold the competition for women. So until that changes it will be only a part time endeavor for her. However, the gloomy prognosis hasn't dimmed her enthusiasm.

"I'm going to continue vaulting as long as I can," she said.

"I love new experiences. I love being up in the air. It feels great when you're at the top of the pole looking down."

Athletic experiences are nothing new to the Lyndhurst native. She was a member of the girl's track team at Stuarts Draft High School, making All State her final three seasons.

In the future the Health and Physical Education major would like to become a teacher and coach track. She plans to continue running in road races such as the Lynchburg 10-miler.