

Masters Champion Feature: Amy Haapanen

By Bob Burns



Amy Haapanen in Action *(photo courtesy of Amy)*

For some people, turning 40 is a fraught experience.

Not so for Amy Haapanen. In fact, her forties are looking a whole lot better than her thirties.

Within four months of reaching that milestone birthday, Haapanen set a pair of U.S. age-group records and claimed her first national title in the women's hammer throw. At the USATF Masters Outdoor Championships at American River College in July, Haapanen threw the hammer 190 feet, 6 inches to break her record she set a month earlier of 189-10.

Later this month, the Sacramento resident will take aim at a gold medal at the World Masters Athletics Championships in Gothenburg, Sweden. She is the top-seeded thrower in her age class.

Given her pedigree – an All-American at UC Santa Barbara who came within six inches of qualifying for the U.S. Olympic team in 2012 – her recent form isn't terribly surprising.

What's more than surprising is what she overcame to get back in the ring again. A rock-climbing accident in 2017 left her wondering whether she'd ever feel whole again – let alone be able to spin four times in a seven-foot circle before launching an 8.8-pound ball nearly 200 feet.

"I'm just happy to be throwing," she said. "I enjoy feeling athletic and feeling strong.

The daughter of a Finnish father and a Panamanian mother, Haapanen grew up in the Central Valley town of Manteca, where she excelled in basketball, volleyball and track at East Union High School.

"My goals coming out of high school were to be an All-American and go to the Olympics," Haapanen (pronounced happenin') said. "I figured I had a better shot in track than the other sports."

She accepted a track scholarship to UC Santa Barbara, where the coaches instructed each of their incoming throwers to branch out.

"At Santa Barbara, everyone was told they're going to throw the hammer," Haapanen said. "I wound up breaking the school record three times as a freshman."

She found her calling. By the time she graduated in 2007, Haapanen had earned All-American honors in the hammer and held USCB records in the hammer (213-9), discus (170-10) and shot put (52-3 ¼). She was the Big West Conference female athlete of the year in track and field.

With one of her major goals out of the way, she then set her sights on making the U.S. Olympic team. She gave it a good shot. Haapanen competed in three U.S. Olympic Trials (2008, 2012 and 2016), finishing a close fourth with what remains her personal best throw – 231-8. The third-place finisher, Jessica Crosby, threw 232-2, six inches farther than Haapanen, to claim the third and final berth on the Olympic team.

Fourth place at the U.S. Olympic Trials is considered by some to be the worst possible spot to finish – one place shy of qualifying for the Olympic team. So close, yet so far.

Haapanen didn't see it that way then, nor does she now.



“I threw a lifetime best at the Olympic Trials,” she said. “That’s something to be proud of.”

She qualified for the U.S. Trials again in 2016 and planned to continue on to 2020 when she accepted an invitation from friends to try rock-climbing at a location just outside of Yosemite National Park.

The rope she was connected to snapped, sending Haapanen crashing head-first into a wall of granite. Her then-fiancée, Kevin Valente, was in Sacramento at the time and rushed to Manteca when he heard the news.

“It was terrifying,” he said. “had You could tell something wasn’t right.”

Haapanen’s mind and body were seriously tested in what turned out to be a marathon recovery. The muscles in her legs atrophied. When she tried to do some of the basic drills associated with the hammer, her hips and knees wouldn’t cooperate.

And the aftershocks of the concussion were even more disturbing. She couldn’t watch TV and had to leave a room if there were too many voices mixing together.

“Mysterious things were happening,” Haapanen said. “I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, I may not be able to run again. Or what if I want to have kids?’ Then there was the emotional feeling that I was robbed of so many years of my life.”

With the support of her husband and a team of physicians and therapists, Haapanen eventually started seeing improvement. She returned to her beloved hammer again in early 2024 and works out several times a week at Urijah Faber’s gym near Sacramento State. Part of her regime includes kick boxing, which she has found valuable for the hammer.

Her victory at the U.S. Masters Championships in July was particularly satisfying because a group of family and friends were on hand to support her. She views her recent record-breaking as a reward for everything she went through on what Kevin calls “a really long road back.”

“The record wasn’t on my radar when I started throwing again this season, but once I became aware of it,” Haapanen said, “it was a mark that gave me encouragement and validation for all my efforts in healing my body and reintroducing myself to throwing again.

“I just love love throwing ... always chasing that mark. When I’m frustrated with not throwing farther, I have to ask myself, ‘Remember how badly you wanted to do this again?’

“Now I can feel the fun of track again.”