



OLYMPIC STARDOM

USD alumnus Chris Nilsen follows Coyote tradition of success with a silver medal

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Pole vaulters have a term to describe one of their worst nightmares. It's called being "spit out," a phrase that sounds a lot like what happened in the Biblical account of Jonah and the whale.

In the world of track and field, it's an ignominious term that vaulters use when you sprint as fast as you can down the runway and plant your pole but you don't have enough force to get up and over the bar. The result is a humiliating and often painful return to terra firma.

It's an experience Chris Nilsen knows all too well after getting the spitting treatment three straight times during his first attempt at pole vaulting back when he was a freshman at Park Hill High School in Kansas City.

But years of hard work, the support of family and friends, and the guidance of several capable coaches paid off when Nilsen secured a silver medal in the Tokyo Olympics.

The University of South Dakota alumnus was given a grand reception when he returned from Tokyo and met a crowd of several hundred well-

wishers at the Muenster University Center in Vermillion. Trailing behind a police escort, the USD grad rolled onto campus perched proudly in the back of a Jeep and waved to the onlookers lining the streets with his silver medal glinting in the summer sun.

The celebration included his parents, Mark and Karen Nilsen, university officials, athletic department representatives and a bevy of youngsters who got to hold the medal for a moment and dream of their own Olympic success one day.

Nilsen turned in a personal best of 19 feet, 7 inches during his time in Tokyo. Coming up two inches shy of Swedish gold medalist Armand "Mondo" Duplantis, Nilsen became the only U.S. vaulter to finish second or better in the event since 2004.

The celebration on the Coyotes campus was the first time Nilsen's parents saw their son since he departed for Tokyo to prepare for the games. His USD track coach, Derek Miles, was the only other individual allowed to accompany Nilsen due to COVID-19 restrictions. Miles claimed a bronze medal in the pole vault at the 2008

Beijing Olympics and also qualified for the Olympics in Athens in 2004 and London in 2012.

Miles couldn't resist taking a few good-natured jabs as his protégé during the celebration: "I'm a little upset with Chris right now. It took me about 12 years after graduation to win an Olympic medal and he did it in a year. He got a better color than I did and jumped about a foot higher."

Then he turned more serious in congratulating Nilsen on his accomplishment: "It was a pretty special moment to coach him at the Olympics. As a coach, you want the best out of your athlete and it was a special moment to see him respond to adversity when he missed 19 feet on the first attempt and then come back and win the silver."

Nilsen credited Miles and the supportive cultural environment at USD for much of his success.

"The reason I came here was because of the culture. USD was my fourth official visit after a few SEC schools. But Derek looked me in the eye and said, 'You can go to any school you want in the country and probably become a better pole vaulter, but you'll never find a coach who cares more about you than I do.' It shows what kind of person he is and he's allowed to be that kind of person because of the culture here."