

WORLD CLASS ATHLETE PROGRAM

GRADUATES AT THE OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER SERVE AS AMBASSADORS FOR THE AIR FORCE

PRAXIS means not only to try, but also to penetrate, to strive, to give in, to win, to lose, to kneel down, to get up, to accept the struggle and fight until the last breath . . .

—Kyriacos Lazarides | Inscribed in the Olympic Training Center Hall of Fame

Every four years, the world comes together to celebrate history's most revered sporting event. A collection of athletic challenges—ranging from track and field in the summer to downhill skiing in the winter—the Olympic Games shimmer with the virtues of peace, inspiration, triumph and perseverance. Men and women from all across the globe teach us to lay aside the adversities of racial, political and social strife, and to unite under the spirit of competition. Nations brim with pride as their athletes run, skate, swim and pole vault their way onto the coveted gold medal pedestal—tears streaming as the sound of their national anthem fills the arena. We have all been inspired by the triumphs of our nation's dedicated young athletes, whether it be Lindsey Vaughn clenching the gold in downhill skiing, Mary Lou Retton defeating the Soviet powerhouse to win the women's all-around in gymnastics, or Michael Phelps taking home an astonishing eight gold medals in a single games. The Olympics are, and always will be, the pinnacle of all athletic challenge.

Gaining a slot on your nation's Olympic team is one of the most daunting tasks an athlete can face. Many will try, but only a few will be selected to join the ranks of the elite. In the past 50 years, Air Force Academy cadets have come to know what it means to be part of an elite group. Gaining a congressional appointment, being at the top of one's class and facing virtually every challenge that can be leveraged against the mind and body have propelled legions of graduates on to do great things, including a handful who have earned the opportunity to represent their nation in the Olympic arena.

Eli Bremer, '00, is one such graduate. A member of the 2008 Olympic Pentathlon Team in Beijing, China, Bremer will likely be competing in his second Olympics in 2012. As a pentathlete, he trains every day in the five categories which comprise his event: swimming, running, shooting, fencing and horseback riding. Unlike a swimmer or sprinter, who need only to finish first in a single race, a pentathlete must acquire points in all five categories to clinch the gold. "It would take a pentathlete 32 years of winning consecutive gold medals to equal what Michael Phelps earned in one Olympics," says Bremer with a smile. "But that's kind of the allure of the sport: you only get one chance. It's not something you can do-over the following week; you have to wait another four years." ▷

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEWIS CARLYLE



Olympic pentathlete, Eli Bremer, '00, aims his target pistol. Pentathlon consists of shooting, running, swimming, fencing and horseback riding.

WORLD CLASS ATHLETES

Four years in the life of an athlete is a long time, during which a lot can happen. Injury and burnout have claimed a number of promising competitors over the years, which is why Bremer keeps a closely regimented training schedule. “The Olympics are a full time, professional occupation,” he explains. “You have to train 24-seven, 365 days a year. You’re never off duty because you’re constantly driving for a higher peak.”

The higher peak is what all Olympians must strive for, which is why Bremer remains so committed to yet another project in addition to his training. The World Class Athlete Program, or WCAP, is designed to help Air Force athletes get a spot on the US Olympic Team, and to represent their nation internationally. Seth Kelsey, '03, is a two time Olympian on the US Fencing Team and a good friend of Bremer at the training center. Kelsey is one of only two cadets in the history of the Academy to win the NCAA championship in fencing. He and Bremer both travel extensively with the WCAP program. Together, they both serve as ambassadors for the Air Force and for the United States.

“For years,” Bremer explains, “Army has been competing in elite level sports. The Air Force saw the value in that. Public relations and marketing are big part of that. We travel around the world and put a different face on the Air Force. We’re reaching out to kids in a very different way. A few weeks ago I spoke to several thousand kids in South Georgia who had never met an Olympian, and most of them had never met an Air Force officer. It’s a great way to reach communities within the U.S. From an international standpoint, we get to be ambassadors for both the Air Force and the United States in a way that other people can’t.”

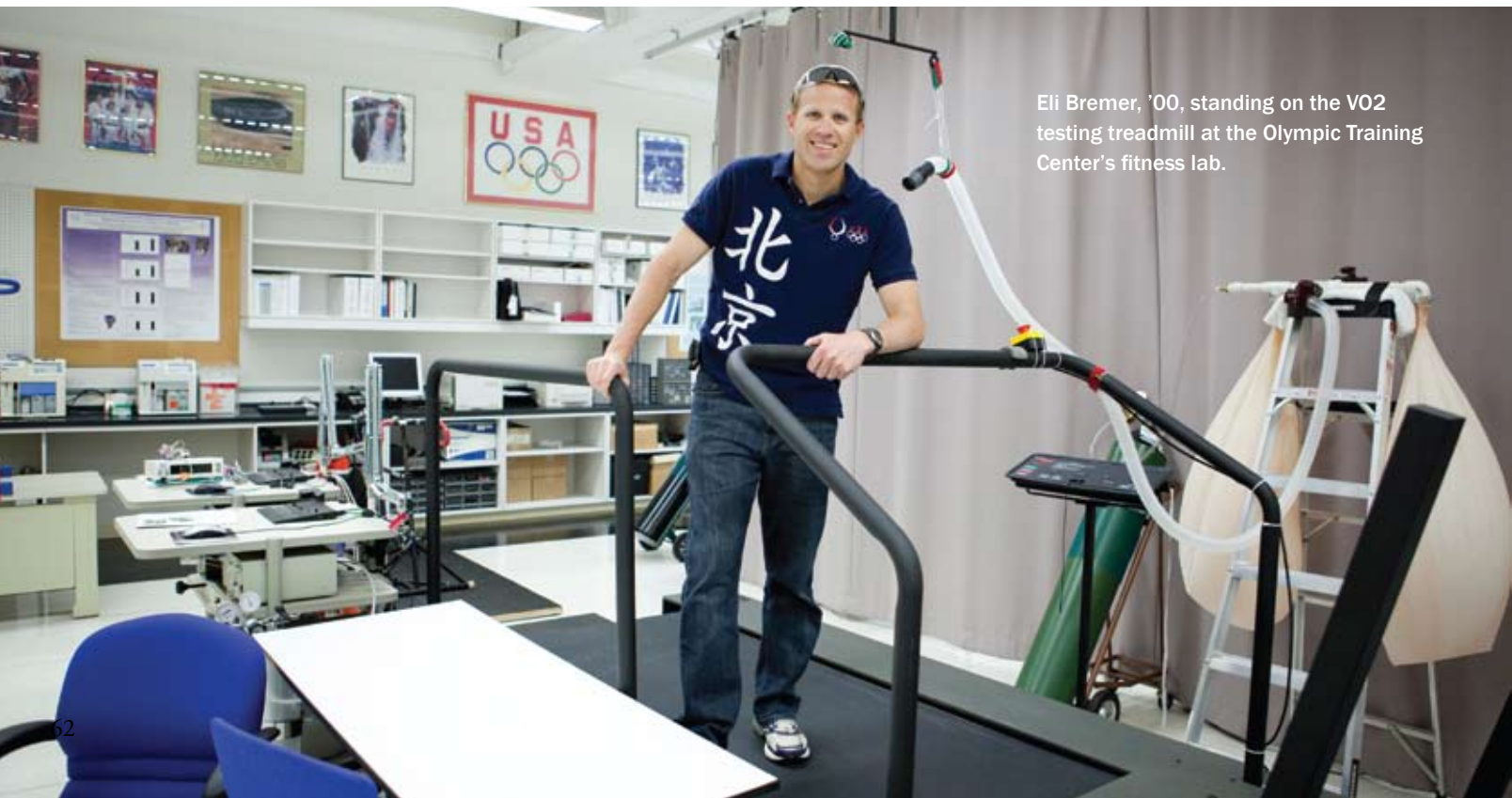
“We go to Kuwait and Qatar every year,” Kelsey describes, “and we don’t stay on base. Instead, we stay in the city where we can interact with the normal population. For instance, if you enter a country like Egypt as a member of the military, they treat you much differently than if you come in as an Olympian.”

The WCAP program provides the Air Force a myriad of out-reach opportunities, exclaims Bremer. Once an airman is in the WCAP program, being an ambassador for the United States and for the Air Force is a full time job. Bremer continues, “It’s one of the great advantages of the program; we fly around the world representing the United States. We have an international reach that no other branch of the military can really achieve. Sports has a way of bringing about a dialogue with other cultures. It’s a way for us to extend an olive branch rather than a hammer.”

As senior athletes, both Bremer and Kelsey keep a sharp eye out for fresh young talent. Bremer says, “We try to catch some of the kids coming out of the Academy who are very promising, potential Olympic athletes. It’s a very high bar to meet. We have to look at their athleticism and what sport they’re in: you can be a great swimmer coming out of the pool at the Academy, but if a guy like Michael Phelps is ahead of you, it can be very hard to qualify for the Olympics.”

Kelsey is quick to point out that WCAP also serves as a strong intra-squadron morale booster. “There’s a big push for fitness in the Air Force these days. Having an Olympian in the squadron to help promote that is a good thing.”

Bremer relates, “There’s a lot of appreciation in the Air Force for what we do, because it’s beyond the norm. I was a featured



Eli Bremer, '00, standing on the V02 testing treadmill at the Olympic Training Center's fitness lab.



Above: Fencer Seth Kelsey, '03 (left), crosses swords with his sparring partner during training. Right: Kathy Rex, '84, member of USA Team Handball at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul Korea.

speaker at Peterson Air Force Base on physical fitness last year. Furthermore, those of us who are coming up on the tail end of our athletic careers are trying to take on a mentoring role for the young upcoming athletes. Seth's been through two Olympics, I've been through one. . . We understand what it's like to train full time for years on end. There are challenges balancing the Air Force career and training, and there are sacrifices you have to make."

Each career in the Air Force will take an officer down a different path. Whether one chooses to become a pilot, a logistics officer or an intelligence specialist, many sacrifices come with the job. Moving to a new base every few years, going on deployment and taking on new assignments are just a few things officers contend with each year. For the athletes at the Olympic Training Center (both military and civilian), the life of a competitor is a life of sacrifice. "Being an Olympian," Bremer says, "takes a lot of outside support from friends and family. We don't get fully funded for what we do, so we have to rely on spouses, friends or family to help make up the difference." Add 120 days of travel each year, keynote speaking events, a grueling training schedule and continuous pressure to perform at not only the Olympics but many other national and international competitions, WCAP is easily among the most difficult jobs in the service.

Still, both Bremer and Kelsey wouldn't change their stars for the world. In fact, they are joined by another fellow Olympian and Air Force graduate, Kathy Rex, '84. A team handball competitor in the 1988 Games in Seoul Korea, Rex began playing handball the year before she became a cadet. ▷





USAFA OLYMPIANS

Bob Nieman, '70 | Moscow 1980 | Pentathlon
Bob Djokovich, '78 | Los Angeles 1984 | Team Handball
Tom Schneeberger '78 | Los Angeles | Team Handball
Alanzo Babers, '83 | Los Angeles 1984 | Track (Two Gold Medals)
Kathy Rex, '84 | Seoul 1988 | Team Handball

Dominic Grazioli, '86 | Beijing 2008 | Shotgun
Kevin Eastler, '99 | Beijing 2008 | Track
Eli Bremer, '00 | Beijing 2008 | Pentathlon
Seth Kelsey, '03 | Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008 | Fencing

“I actually lived at the Olympic Training Center before I came to the Academy,” she reflects fondly. “While I was a cadet, they would let me leave for Junior World Championships for two weeks at a time. So the Academy was very supportive.”

Rex explains that there was no World Class Athlete Program in those days, but fortunately, Air Force Sports set her up with a permissive TDY whenever a major competition arose. “In 1984,” Rex explains, “I had to choose between graduating from the Academy or competing in the Olympics; it was a very hard decision, but I chose to graduate. In the long run, I’m very glad I made that decision.”

In 1986, Rex was assigned to the Air Force Academy as a physical education instructor. “I taught PE and water survival—this was 25 years ago, and back then they called it physical fitness methods,” she recalls with a laugh. Her proximity to the Olympic Training Center made it possible for her to continue practicing with the handball team, and later compete in Seoul Korea.

Rex remembers her time in Seoul as a once in a lifetime opportunity. “I’d say the most memorable experience for me,” she says,

“was walking into the stadium during the opening ceremonies. It’s a moment at which you reflect back upon all that you’ve done to get there—and all of the people who have helped you (because nobody gets to the Olympics alone)—the spirit of the Games is amazing. It’s a time when the whole world comes together to celebrate sports and to celebrate life.”

Today, Rex is co-founder of the Landsharks Running Club, where she works diligently to promote fitness among America’s youth. “We have over 2,100 kids who run with us,” she says fondly. “It’s huge, we’re in more than 45 schools here in Colorado.”

Rex also took the opportunity to return to her roots by starting a new youth handball league. “We started Landsharks Team Handball in between the running seasons, and we have a fourth through sixth grade league with about 100 kids. It’s the biggest league in the country, so it’s the start of something good. And with our Future’s Program, or high school league, we had 14 kids selected for the girls and boys youth national teams.”

Becoming a role model and mentor for younger generations is one of the best ways an athlete can give back to his or her

sport. Bremer explains, “It’s good to link up with someone who has already done what you’re trying to do. When you’re charting your own course, it’s easy to make mistakes. If you can learn from someone who has already made those mistakes, you can achieve great things.”

Kelsey adds, “Seek good coaching early on in your athletic career. Having a great mentor can make a huge difference. I started fencing when I was eleven, and I was terrible!” he says with a laugh. “Fortunately, the following year we received an Olympic coach from Poland. Training improved and I started making Junior World teams. When it came time for college, Eli Bremer actually recruited me to the Academy. After giving it some thought, I realized, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I could have gone to Penn State—but thousands of people go to Penn State—only a select few get to attend the Air Force Academy.”

Each athlete harkens back to the Academy as a major influence in helping them get to where they are today. Rex surmises, “I

don’t think I would be the leader I am today of these programs if it had not been for my training at the Academy. In order to create something, people have to trust you, people have to want to be a part of what you do. With the Landsharks Running Club, I have 45 coaches who are all volunteer. The Academy laid a foundation of integrity, leadership and people skills which have enabled me to do what I do today. I’m very grateful for it.”

As these athletes continue to train, compete, coach and mentor, we are reminded of why the Olympics have a special place in the hearts and minds of people across the world: the spirit of competition pushes the human race to achieve great things. These achievements, whether they be in the form of a seventh-place finish or a gold medal, will serve as inspiration for the next generation of athletes. As our dedicated graduates continue their pursuit of excellence, we can rest assured that they will continue to make us proud. ✓

Below: Fencer Seth Kelsey, '03 (left) and Pentathlete Eli Bremer, '00.

