

## Smooth Transition: From Gymnastics to Pole Vault

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Rachel Fisher breaks the BYU pole vault record at the MWC Championships.  
BYU Photo/Mark Philbrick

In today's athletic world, parents push their kids into sports early and often, in an effort to mold the next high school star of their community. Premier athletes are recruited before they are old enough to drive and commit to schools before their senior seasons. It's not often that an athlete picks up a sport late in high school and becomes a bona fide success.

BYU freshman Rachel Brooke Fisher broke the normal trend. Fisher, who recently returned from the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships, did not try the pole vault until her junior season in high school. Unbeknownst to her, she had been preparing to be successful at the pole vault her entire life.

Fisher was raised as a gymnast. She started to train at a young age and spent 14 years of her life dedicated to the sport. The last seven years of her training was spent under world renowned coach Yevgeny Marchenko.

"I would train for six hours a day alongside future Olympians Carly Patterson and Nastia Liukin," Fisher said. "I loved gymnastics and was very dedicated to it."

By the time her career ended, Fisher had earned 85 gymnastics medals, including a first place all-around finish in the level seven and level eight state championships. Fisher also took first in the level nine regional, which included competition from seven states.

Fisher's downfall in gymnastics came later in high school, as she progressively got taller. Height is a negative in gymnastics, every inch making it more difficult to complete various moves.

By the time Fisher was a junior in high school she had grown enough to give herself a distinct disadvantage. Her height, along with a serious back injury, motivated Fisher to reluctantly give up gymnastics.

"By the time I was a junior in high school I was receiving recruiting interest from a lot of schools in the NCAA for gymnastics," Fisher said. "But my height really affected my ability to learn new skills, so I could not perform as well as I wanted. That, combined with the back injury, pushed me to decide that gymnastics just was not what I wanted to do any more."

It took only a few days away from gymnastics to drive Fisher to try something new. Her dad had been telling her for years that she should give pole vaulting a try because it employs some of the same skills required from gymnasts. Another bonus for Fisher: height was an advantage in the pole vault.

"After just a few days with nothing to invest my time and efforts in, I was going crazy," Fisher said. "I was so desperate for a new sport that I decided to give pole vaulting a try."

After just the first practice, Fisher had fallen in love with the sport. She quickly learned that pole vaulting is a complex process, and is much more difficult than experienced vaulters make it look.

Fisher excelled early thanks to coaching from Toby Howell, one of that nation's top pole vaulting coaches. His wife was a gymnastics coach, so she could describe pole vaulting technique using gymnastics terms.

After only a few weeks under Howell's supervision, Fisher was competing at a high level. She broke her high school's district record with an 11'6" vault, and followed that by breaking the school record at 12' after only eight weeks in training.

By the time her senior season rolled around, Fisher was dominating her competition. As a member of Club Vaultitude, she won all 17 meets she entered, including the prestigious Texas Relays.

Fisher's high school personal record of 13'3", achieved during her senior campaign, ranked first in the nation from January to May of 2009. After a foot fracture derailed her for 12 weeks, Fisher ended her short high school career with a bang by winning the AAU National Junior Olympic Games with a meet record 12'8" vault.

"I had always wanted to come to BYU, and at first I was worried that I would not get recruiting because I started vaulting so late," Fisher said. "But after I did so well so quickly, I came on a recruiting visit with very high expectations, and it turned out to be better than I ever imagined and I knew BYU was the place for me."

Since arriving on campus, Fisher has been an immediate success. She competed well during indoor season, taking second in the MWC Championships and qualifying for the NCAA National Championships, one of only two freshman pole vaulters to do so.

Fisher also broke the BYU indoor pole vault record, previously 4.03-meters (13-02.5), with a vault of 4.25-meters (13-09.5). She is the first competitor to hold the BYU pole vault record mark as a freshman.

Fisher credits the BYU track and field system for helping her achieve such success.

“I would say I enjoy three aspects of BYU track the most,” Fisher said. “The support I get from my teammates, the coaches and their expertise and all of the resources that are available right here that help me reach my full potential.”

The freshman’s promising career is just beginning and there is still a long way to go. Fisher, always wanting to challenge herself, has her mind set on the ultimate goal.

“I still need to improve a lot of things, and I think I will do even better during outdoor season,” Fisher said. “Ultimately, though, I hope to qualify for the Olympics. There are a lot of great vaulters in the nation right now, so it will be a challenge, but I am up for it.”