



DAILY REPUBLIC
Solano County's News Source

FAIRFIELD-SUISUN CITY, CALIFORNIA



UPDATE: Lockdown at Dixon High lifted; one suspect still at-large



Robyn Stevens, 38, of Vacaville, and Nick Christie, 29, a Fairfield native from San Diego, take time away from their race walking training to participate in an Earth Day cleanup event. (Courtesy photo)

2 racers with Solano connections hoof it toward Olympics

By **Todd R. Hansen**

FAIRFIELD — Robyn Stevens has an eclectic list of idols, though two of them she must count herself among the millions who admire their talents and charisma.

Stevens, 38, of Vacaville, was only 6 years old when she first saw Nadia Comăneci dazzle the world as a 14-year-old gymnast from Romania; and while teetering on dreams of being an athlete or a dancer, it was Mikhail Baryshnikov who captured Stevens' devotion.

But it is the lesser-known Susan Armenta who has had the greatest influence on Stevens – an admiration sparked when she first witnessed Armenta compete at a track and field meet at Stanford University.

Claudia Wilde, who coached school and club track and field teams in Solano County – which included a focus on all the Olympic events – had taken her new protege to the meet to watch the race walkers, and it was Armenta's style that captured Stevens' attention.

But there was a choreographed feel that also attracted Stevens at the time.

"They were all lined up like they were in a chorus line," Stevens recalled about her introduction to race walking.

Stevens, who was undefeated as a junior, made the U.S. Junior World Team in 2000 and 2002.



Robyn Stevens, 38, of Vacaville, competes in the Pan American Cup 20K race walk trials at Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Sunday, April 11, 2021. Stevens is primed to represent the United States in the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games. (Courtesy photo)

Later, Armenta would coach Stevens as she trained for the 2016 Olympics, only to have an injury prevent her from reaching that goal for the second time.

The first missed chance was in 2004, just two years out of high school. Stevens would leave the sport for more than a decade, having developed an eating disorder during her college days and refocusing her life on her work career.

“I decided it was better to take care of my health . . . so I stepped away from the sport,” Stevens said.

She returned to the sport more as a way to stay healthy but found she still had the competitive drive.

“I really didn’t have any plans to return, but then I got a head injury,” Stevens said, explaining the injury caused constant migraines.

When her body started to experience aches and pains, she decided she needed to get back in shape, but she needed a low-impact activity because of the migraines. Walking was the ticket.

That was when Wilde asked her to “pace her” during a 1,500-meter race walk. Her doctor gave her the approval, so she went. It was not long into the race, however, that Wilde and Stevens realized pacing was not going to work, removed the leash and Stevens went on to win the race.

“So I thought, maybe my body wasn’t done with me yet, and there was a story to finish,” Stevens said.

She began training harder, entered races and consistently finished in the top three, and qualified for the Pan American Games.

Another injury kept her out of the 2016 Games, but she decided to commit herself to 2020, only to have those Games postponed for a year.

Now her story has taken her to this opportunity to finally compete for the United States in the 2021 Olympic Games in Japan.

Stevens is ranked 16th in the world, and the top 60 qualify for the Olympics. She feels pretty confident but will learn for sure June 26.

Her goal is to finish in the top eight, which comes with an Olympic certificate. But the one-time undefeated junior and national champion is not without ambition to bring home a medal.

“The first goal is I don’t get hurt, and I would like to defend my 20K title – my national title,” Stevens said. “And I always want to see how fast I can go.”

She said the anticipated heat in Japan will actually work in her favor, as she has always performed well in higher temperatures.

Stevens hopes she can share that experience with her boyfriend, Nick Christie, 29, a Fairfield native who grew up in San Diego. He will learn in the coming weeks if he, too, has earned a spot on the Olympic team.

His father, Dennis Christie, was stationed at Travis Air Force Base. The family moved to San Diego when Christie was 2.

“Nick just needs one more 20K (event) and the Olympic trials for his ranking in the 50K,” Stevens said.

A walk through history

The sport has its roots in Victorian England, and by the time it had emigrated to the United States, it had come to be known as pedestrianism and drew large gaming crowds.

It first appeared at the 1904 Olympics as a half-mile walk in the “all-rounder” competition, which would become the 10-event decathlon. It appeared as its own Olympic sport in 1908 – appropriately in London – but only for men.



Nick Christie, 29, a Fairfield native from San Diego, competes in the Pan American Cup 20K race walk trials at Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Sunday, April 11, 2021. He will soon learn whether he has made the 2021 U.S. Olympic team in the 20K or 50K races. (Courtesy photo)

It would not be until 1992 that race walking would become a women's Olympic event, and even today, women can only compete in the 20K race, while men also compete in the 50K.

The 20K is a 12.43-mile road event, while the 50K covers 31.1 miles.

Like Stevens, Christie has twice before tried to make the U.S. Olympic team but missed out as a very young competitor in 2012, and by just a couple of spots in 2016.

A baseball player in high school, he also competed in track and field, and cross-country.

Competing as a hurdler and pole vaulter at Cuyamaca Community College but with thoughts of the decathlon, Christie was asked to fill in the seventh and final spot on the cross-country team.

"I really hated cross-country," Christie said with a laugh. "I did it in high school and explicitly said I would not do cross-country again."

But he did, and it was there he caught the attention of an American legend in the sport of race walking, Tim Seaman, who refashioned Christie into an Olympic hopeful.

Seaman competed for the U.S. in the 2000 and 2004 Olympics, is the seven-time U.S. 20K champion and won the 5,000-meter U.S. Indoor Track and Field Championships race walk competition 13 times. He still holds the American record for the fastest 10K at 39 minutes, 22.7 seconds.

Christie, at 5 feet 10 inches and 140 pounds, has the right build.

"I really like the technical part of it," Christie said. "Coming from hurdles and pole vault, and that is one of the things I liked about baseball; there is a certain precision that is needed."

Christie had broken his collarbone while competing in a cycling race, and race walking was something he could still do.

"Tim Seaman said, 'If you do this, I will qualify you for the Olympic trials and we will go from there,'" Christie said.

His two near misses of making the Olympic team in 2012 and 2016 only fueled the desire.

"I'm just a few spots off the 20K and a few spots off the 50K," Christie said about his rankings. "The 50K seems very possible."

He said he is watching closely a planned race in Europe, hoping some of the top 20K walkers stay away from the 50K competition, which could push him back.

The reason he is hopeful that will happen is because the two competitions are scheduled on back-to-back days during the Olympics and it is unlikely anyone will compete in both.

"I personally like the 20K, but this the last 50K for the foreseeable future, so just for the nostalgia, I wouldn't mind doing it," Christie said.

Stevens had started her athletic interests in soccer, and was good at it, but she also danced and there were greater hopes of earning a college scholarship competing in track and field.

So soccer was the first to go, then dance.

It was Wilde who planted the seed of the Olympics before Stevens entered high school.

"In junior high, I went to a cross-country race in Dixon and I beat some of her boys," Stevens said.

The time is ripe

Race walking does have specific requirements.

One foot must always be on the ground, and the foot must be straight when it passes under the hip as deemed solely by the judge's eye.

The speed in the sport is generated by the turnover in steps, which is why the sport is generally dominated by smaller athletes.

“There are people who are tall, but most of the better walkers are smaller,” said Stevens, who is just under 5 feet 3 inches.

She also notes that the prime for race walkers, unlike most other sports, is during the ages of 35 to 45.

“Race walking is pretty unique in that the older you get the better you get,” Stevens said.

The couple train in Vacaville, San Diego and the Tehachapi desert area.

Printed in the May 09, 2021 edition on page A1 | Published on May 9, 2021 |
Last Modified on May 8, 2021 at 11:12 am

Tags: [A1](#), [featured](#)

Sign Up For Our Free Daily Newsletter

Subscribe



254,680 Votes

Was Donald Trump one of the best presidents in U.S. history? (First 1,000 responses get FREE gift)

Promoted Content

CalMatters

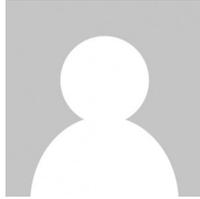


"Outdoor dining, to-go drinks could be here to stay | CalMatters
12 hours ago

"Urban housing projects need to be unfettered | CalMatters
12 hours ago

"Opini3n: Los proyectos de vivienda urbana deben estar sin restricciones | CalMatters
14 hours ago

"Las comidas al aire libre y las bebidas para llevar podrian estar aqu3 para quedarse | CalMatters
15 hours ago



Todd R. Hansen is Reporter-Editor for the Daily Republic. He covers Solano County, Transportation, the Environment and General Assignment. Reach him at 427-6932 or thansen@dailyrepublic.net.

[Story Archive](#)

[Email](#)

