

A female volleyball player in a red jersey is captured mid-air, performing a backflip over a net. Her eyes are closed and her mouth is open in a shout or gasp. The background is a blurred indoor arena with spectators and a blue banner that says "NCAA".

GOING BEYOND BELIEF

Pippi Lotta Enok is willing herself to become one of the Sooner greats and has her sights set on the Olympics.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



Enok clears the bar at the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championships.

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IX EVENTS INTO THE WOMEN'S heptathlon at the 2023 NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships, Pippi Lotta Enok found herself in first place and on the threshold of doing something no other University of Oklahoma athlete had ever done.

Eight hundred grueling meters in 100-degree heat were the only things standing between the OU sophomore and an NCAA combined events title.

"I knew if I stayed focused and believed in myself and my ability that I could compete for a national championship," says Enok, a native of Estonia. "I got off to a good start on the first day and my confidence just kind of grew from there."

Enok entered the two-day, seven-event competition as the No. 12 overall seed in a



The bib note Enok wrote herself a night before the NCAA Championships.

field of 24 national qualifiers. While she was not among the list of favorites, Enok kept herself in contention by posting personal bests in three—100-meter hurdles, high jump and 200-meters—of the four opening-day events.

"Pippi really put herself in a good position after the first day and by the way she performed," says Jerel Langley, associate head coach for OU Track and Field. "She's kind of a 'day-two person' because the last three events are probably her strongest. We knew going into Saturday that she had a realistic shot to win it."

On day two, Enok moved from fifth place into fourth with a solid showing in the long jump and then bolted to the top of the standings by winning the javelin throw, which set her up to become the first OU student-athlete to ever capture an NCAA combined events title.

All she needed to do was turn in a personal best in the 800 in front of a national ESPN audience on collegiate track and field's biggest stage.

The Note

The night before the NCAA Championships, Enok was going over final preparations when she wrote herself a little note.

"The idea came to me and I wanted to manifest it in some way," says Enok. "If it's just a fleeting thought, it's probably not going to happen—so I decided to write it down, mainly because I felt good about my form and the possibility of doing well at the NCAAAs."

On the back side of the NCAA bib that contained her competition number and was pinned to the front of her uniform, she wrote, "I am gonna be a national champ. Believe-Believe-Believe. Have Fun. You Do You, Pip. Event By Event. Focus on Good!"

"I never looked at the note during the competition, but I knew it was there and I feel that message stayed with me all the way through to the end," says Enok, who a few months earlier had won the Big 12 Conference indoor pentathlon title with a school-record performance.

The Pressure

In possession of first place going into the decisive 800-meter event, Enok suddenly found herself in the role of being the hunted instead of the hunter. She knew Vanderbilt senior Beatrice Juskeviciute was only 27 points behind her and had a history of being a strong finisher.

"I remember being really nervous before the race. I knew I had to stick close to Juskeviciute for the first 600 meters and then try to beat her down the stretch," says Enok.

And that's exactly what she did, saving her best overall performance of the season for last—waiting until the final 120 meters to run past her rival to finish fifth in the race with a personal-best time of 2:17.36, which gave her an OU-record 6,165 total points and the gold medal.

"Honestly, it was a big relief to finish like that—just a really special moment," says Enok.

For Langley, it was a moment that had been in the making since he first started recruiting Enok as a 17-year-old.

"It was great to see Pippi go out in that setting and to see all of her hard work and dedication pay off with a national title," he says. "Truly a milestone for her and the entire OU program."

From Estonia to Oklahoma

Langley initially reached out to Enok in 2018 when she was competing for Estonia at the European U18 Track and Field Championships in Hungary.

"OU had an Estonian decathlete named Kristo Simulask who was a Big 12 Conference champ and an All-American, and he knew who Pippi was," says Langley. "We saw some video on her and knew that she had a lot of potential. I reached out to her on an Instagram video chat, and it just kind of took off from there."

Over the next several years, Langley kept tabs on Enok's progress through high school and on the international stage via Estonia's junior track and field team. Although she never visited campus or met Langley in person, Enok eventually committed to OU and joined the program in fall 2021.

"I had some other colleges that were interested in me, but I didn't really care because I knew from a pretty early stage that I wanted to go to OU," says Enok, who also competed in volleyball, soccer and figure skating before deciding to focus on track and field at age 14. "Even though it was long distance, Coach Langley and I developed a great relationship. Maybe call it intuition, but I just felt like Oklahoma is where I wanted to be."

The Making of a Champion

Enok struggled at times during her first year at OU, but Langley's belief in her and her ability did not waver.



A fierce competitor, Enok has “a completely different level of dedication from 99% of athletes,” Coach Langley says.

“There was a big adjustment for Pippi coming to the United States that first year, plus she was dealing with some stuff off the track,” says Langley. “But she never stopped wanting to be good and has a completely different level of dedication than 99% of athletes I have seen.

“To be a heptathlete, you need a variety of skills—speed, strength, coordination and endurance—all of the basics of being a great athlete. But even more important is mental toughness. Pippi has all of that.”

OU strength coach Cory Nelms points to Enok’s overall mindset as her biggest asset.

“Pippi came to OU with the type of work ethic and dedication required to be a championship athlete. Once she got acclimated to being here after that first season, it was obvious that she also had the talent and desire to be a national champion,” says Nelms.

But why the heptathlon and its incredibly challenging combination of track and field events?

“I’ve never had a single event that I was really good at and was my main focus,” says Enok. “Plus, doing just one event always kind of seemed boring, so multiple events is kind of a natural fit for me. I enjoy the challenge that comes with competing as a heptathlete.”

That enjoyment showed up in a big way during the 2023 season, especially at the NCAA Outdoor Championships.

“For her to win an NCAA title like she did makes her one of the greatest athletes in OU history,” says Langley. “She’s definitely in that conversation, and the best part is, she still has a very bright future ahead of her—including a possible trip to the Olympics this summer.”

Enok returned to Estonia last summer to compete in the European U23 Track and Field Championships, earning a bronze medal that moved her closer to qualifying for the 2024 Olympics in Paris.

“That’s my ultimate goal, to represent my home country and the University of Oklahoma in the Olympics,” says Enok, who currently ranks 28th in the world, just four spots from qualifying for the summer games. “I feel I have a very good chance to make that a reality if I continue to work, train hard and put myself in a position to do well over the next few months.” ●

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