

# IN FOCUS

Article and photos by Rob Jerome

## “Build It and They Will Come” Steve Hanes and “Pole Vault in Paradise”



Ask anyone in Key West and they will tell you that Pole Vault in Paradise is Steve Hanes' baby. Almost single-handedly in four short years, the successful Masters Athlete has built the

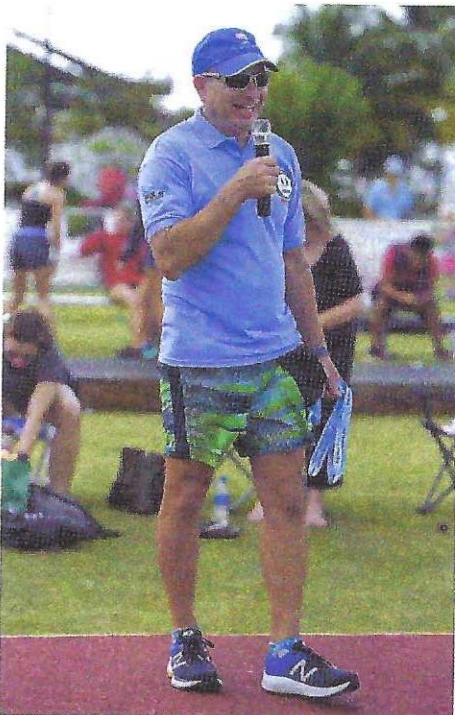
germ of an idea into one of the top pole vaulting events in the country. When the rest of the country is in a deep freeze, each year the pole vault community – Elite, Youth and Masters – gather in balmy Key West in early January to start their year off right.

What Hanes has done with Pole Vault in Paradise is an object lesson for Masters Athletes everywhere. If you love an event, do something about it. Build a meet to celebrate it and invite others to participate who share your love.

I have photographed Pole Vault in Paradise twice and I caught up with Steve after the latest edition to find out how he developed such a gem of an event.

**Congratulations on the fourth annual edition of Pole Vault in Paradise, which was held January 7 in Key West. It is quickly developing into one of the premier pole vaulting meets in the country. Before we talk about the meet, let's talk a little about your background in the sport. Were you a vaulter in high school and college? When did you start in Masters?**

I started pole vaulting around seven years old in the backyard. Landed in the grass and used bamboo poles. At thirteen and fifteen, I won the National Jr. Olympics and set the national age group record. I still hold my high school record of 15' where I won five



▲ Event organizer Steve Hanes

Kansas State Championships. In college I lost interest until I took it up again at 58 years old. A few years earlier I had read about an 82-year-old man that was pole vaulting and it got me thinking about it again.

**It seems to me that many Masters Athletes, interested in developing local meets, can learn from what you have done with Pole Vault in Paradise. So many people have told me that you almost single-handedly started the meet and developed it into what it is today. Take us through how you came up with the idea, how you organized the first meet and what challenges you faced with that first meet.**

Two ideas converged. Every year the local high school track team would have to cancel a meet or two because

they did not have funds to travel to the mainland. About the time I was learning about the local high school track team, I was also participating at the Port Aransas Beach Vault. I said to myself (and anyone who would listen), we could do that and raise money for the track team.

I did not have any experience running a pole vault competition. However, I had competed and seen how various meets were run. I knew what I liked and did not like when competing so I just set up the meet how I would like a meet to be run.

The biggest challenge is getting volunteers to commit months in advance. Ideally you know who will show up and have all the positions assigned. Although our advanced commitments are still fewer than we need, we are getting a lot of volunteers showing up in the last few days.

**Pole Vault in Paradise is sanctioned by USATF. This is important to ensure that record-setting results be properly recognized. What steps did you go through to be sanctioned by USATF?**

Sanctioning is basically committing in writing to various USATF requirements. In return they provide benefits such as inexpensive meet insurance and medical coverage during the meet for USATF members.

We go beyond USATF sanctioning requirements by setting up our elite runway to USATF and WMA standards. That includes leveling the runway to 1 / 100 of an inch and hiring a land surveying company to verify. We are known for a very fast runway

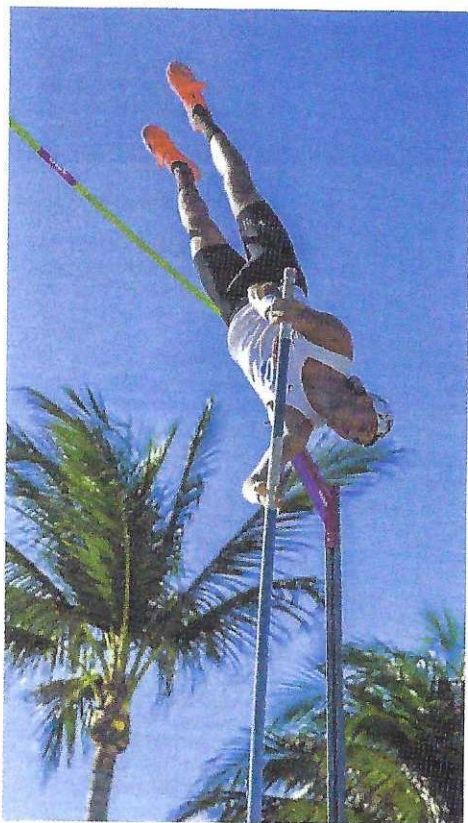
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and want all marks to be certified. We also have USATF Certified Pole Vault Officials running the flights.

**2023 marked the fourth time you have held the annual meet. Has it become easier over the years organizing the meet or has its growth presented new problems?**

We get more help every year but the work just keeps growing. The stress is that no matter how much we do in advance, we only have 48 hours to move about four tons of equipment to the beach and set it up



▲ Elite Vaulter Austin Miller, 2023 Gold 5.47m

**Competitors at the meet range from Youth to Elite to Masters. Why was it important to you to include the full range of ages and abilities in Pole Vault in Paradise?**

We market the event to the locals as, “Come hang out at the beach, bring your chairs or towel, and watch pole vaulters.” Many of our spectators have never seen pole vaulting before. They are just as amazed to see a 9-year-old girl or a 70-year-old man as an elite pole vaulter.

**Let’s talk a little about the “Paradise” part of Pole Vault in Paradise. Key West in January certainly is paradise compared to most of the country in winter. How has Key West gotten behind the meet? Where do the proceeds from the meet go?**

If I start naming sponsors I might leave somebody out. Here are a few examples: The local lumberyard donates the lumber for the runways. The local hardware store donates drainage pipe to raise the pit. The local equipment rental company provides us with lights, tents, chairs, tables. A local pizza company donates 200 slices of pizza. The list goes on and on. We typically raise \$5,000 to \$10,000 in cash donations in addition to in-kind donations. The county’s Tourist Development Council provided us \$17,000 in funds specifically for marketing. We do a lot of Facebook, etc. to promote the event.

All of our staff are volunteers. This is an expensive meet to host. Still, we are able to give the Key West High School track team about \$15,000 a year in cash or equipment. We partner with the May Sands Montessori School for the food and beverage which nets them funds. Finally, we hold back a little bit each year to re-invest in the next year. We put our income tax filing on our website for all to see.

**What are your future plans for Pole Vault in Paradise?**

On a practical note, for next year we plan to refurbish the existing runway and likely build a third runway before PVIP 2024.

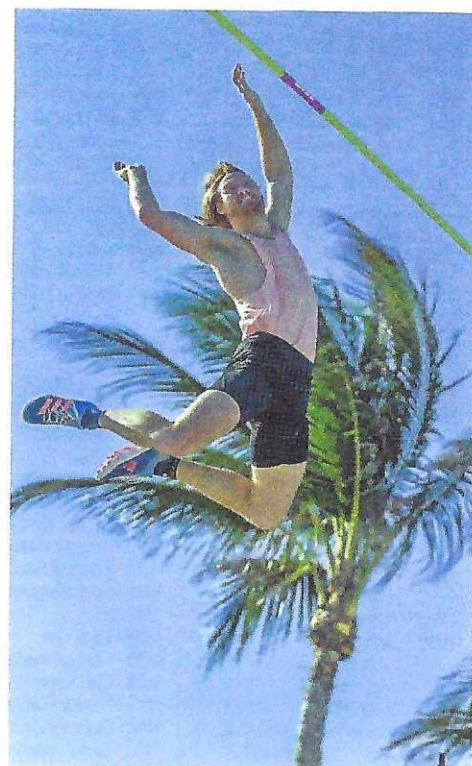
Two longer term goals come to mind. I’m 67 years old. The pits and runways get heavier every year. We need to find some younger people who know pole vaulting to eventually take over as event directors. I am constantly looking.

We are trying to create something special for the elite pole vaulters. Despite not being a major championship, we want Pole Vault in Paradise to be somewhere they want to go each year. There’s no place like Key West. 75 degrees and sunny on

the beach in January? A place they can kick off their season in a relaxed environment. We give them four days of accommodations to hang out a few days with their vaulting friends while getting in some good competitive work. No pressures to hurry in and hurry out. Along those lines we will gradually increase our prize money in the upcoming years and are always listening to their feedback. If we make great conditions for the elites, the youth and masters will also experience incredible conditions.

**The Pole Vault Community is especially tight knit. Everyone seems to know one another, and the mutual support at the meet was inspirational. Why do you think Pole Vaulters consider themselves one big family?**

I think you are correct in your assessment about one big family. Your question “why” is a great one but that is not my field of expertise. What we are trying to figure out at PVIP is how can we enhance the one big pole vault family at PVIP. After all, Key West is known for its “One Human Family” attitude.



▲ Elite Vaulter Carson Waters 2023 Silver 5.47m