

AIMING FOR GOLD

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By Bill Rozak

University of Alaska Fairbanks coach Dan Jordan had no idea who Sagen Maddalena was in 2013 when the Grovelander called to inquire about shooting for his Nanooks, one of the country's premier collegiate programs.

Jordan made some phone calls. What he heard made him take a chance on a young woman with no experience. "They all sang her praises," Jordan said. Three years later, the 11-year head coach knows he struck gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

After walking on and redshirting her freshman season, Maddalena, 22, has a full ride scholarship and is one of the top collegiate shooters in the nation.

She is a two-time All-American and co-team captain and is taking dead aim at representing the United States in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil.

Maddalena will compete with nine others June 3-5 at Camp Perry, Ohio, for one spot on the Olympic team.

While the Olympics is her ultimate goal, she's not about to get ahead of herself. She's staying focused on her process, not letting the big stage become overwhelming.

"I've been concentrating on the mental aspect of shooting and how to make my process better. I'm driven to shoot more by the process than the score I get," she said. "That process is a good attitude and acting like a champion to become one. Maybe it's not the time for me yet, maybe it is. But I wouldn't

be shocked if I made the team. I would accept it. It's all about moving forward and getting better, taking things one day at a time."

GROWING UP WITH ANIMALS, GUNS

Maddalena was born in Winters, but since age 6, was raised on five acres a few miles east of Groveland by her parents Randy and Susan.

Being a member of 4-H throughout her youth, she was always taking care of an animal, pigs, lambs, horses and goats, of which she had a small herd with a dog that protected them. She had her own business where she would take her goats, and guard dog, and rent them out to property owners that needed brush or weeds cleared.

"When I was younger, I thought that's what I would do, and that's what I was doing until I got into shooting and there isn't room for much else," Maddalena said.

She played tennis competitively. She took piano lessons for 13 years, is quite the artist and good at everything she does, according to her doting mom. Maddalena makes it back to her mountain home surrounded by pine trees maybe twice a year where her mother says she heads right for the horses "to ride and get grounded."

4-H was also where Maddalena started shooting, through the twice per year .22 program at Mother Lode Gun Club in Jamestown.

"I hadn't shot a gun very much, my grandpa Greg (Moore) had taken me out



a few times," Maddalena said. "That second class it clicked. The smell, the feeling, the fire."

Her grandpa, who was big into black powder shooting, gave Maddalena her first gun, an old, heavy pistol she still has and calls the "block."

The .22 program put her on the radar of California Grizzlies rifle team coach Robert Taylor, of Columbia. From there, Maddalena earned a spot on the team and blossomed in high power, using a .22 caliber rifle.

She was awarded Distinguished Rifleman by the Civilian Marksmanship Program in 2011; President's 100 by the CMP in 2010 and 2011; High Overall Junior by the National Rifle Association in 2011 and helped the Grizzlies win the Whistler Boy Trophy (2011) and Freedom's Fire Trophy (2013).

She credits Taylor and the Grizzlies for teaching her preparation and leadership.

When she was thinking about college, Taylor suggested she try to continue shooting and learn to compete in air gun and smallbore, a .22 caliber rifle.

GETTING UP TO SPEED FAST

When Jordan agreed to let Maddalena walk on to his program, she had zero experience shooting an air gun, a rifle that shoots a pellet with compressed air. Her background was strictly in high power, shooting .22 caliber bullets.

So Maddalena went online in search of her air gun. She found what she wanted and her parents, instead of buying her a new car for college, spent about \$4,000 on a new, high-tech, thick weighted barreled rifle with precise, adjustable sights and stocks that weigh about 12-13 pounds.

She has a 1984 Toyota 4-wheel drive that doesn't come close to the price of her rifle.

There wasn't a good place at home to shoot, so Maddalena received help from her neighbors, the Fultons, and developed a raw shooting range, where she would carry a rattlesnake stick for protection and lay in the dirt every day to practice.

"She took me with her one day, and I couldn't believe she was walking through all that brush and laying in the dirt," Susan Maddalena said. "She told me to grab the rattlesnake stick and watch where I stepped."

FAST FIRST IMPRESSION

Maddalena must've done something right with her pre-Alaska air gun training as she immediately established herself with the Nanooks. During her redshirt season, she was voted by her teammates as the team's Most Valuable Player.



Sage Maddalena is Taking Aim at the 2016 Summer Olympics
Courtesy Photo / Alaskananoos.com

"She wasn't even competing and she was voted MVP by the team," Jordan said. "That's one of the most impressive things I've ever seen in coaching."

Maddalena, who was home-schooled until she was a freshman and then was on independent study, couldn't compete that first year because Keys Charter School, even though accredited, was not on the NCAA's list of qualified institutions.

The only competition Maddalena saw was the World Cup tryouts in May 2014. Jordan suggested she compete to gain some match experience and it proved worthy as Maddalena qualified to compete internationally and has since competed in Spain, Germany and Sweden.

SAGEN THE SHOOTER

Jordan says a great shooter is typically "very analytical, detail oriented, constant students of the game and disciplined."

"It's funny, it's one of the only sports where if you hold something as still as possible, you're elite," Jordan said. "With her awareness, discipline, desire, she's got everything she needs."

Maddalena approximates that she pulls the trigger about 1,200 times per week. That's dry firing, mental training and live shooting. "It all depends what I'm working on."

During the season, the team meets together maybe once per week, but each shooter is responsible for getting in 16 training hours per week.

When Jordan was asked what Sage was like off the range, he responded, "Ha! Who's that? She's always asking for the keys to use the range."

Maddalena's dedication has helped make her a two-time National Rifle Association and Collegiate Rifle Coaches Association All-America. This past season with the Nanooks, she averaged 593 out of 600 and won six individual titles. She scored 597 or higher in six meets, including a personal best 598 on four occasions.

"It's a step on the journey to where I'm going," Maddalena said. "It showed me I did pretty well and that I'm still improving. But that's probably my biggest accomplishment so far."



When Maddalena gets off the range and is not studying for major in natural resource management with a concentration in forestry, she'll wake up early drink some coffee and watch the sunrise.

She also hunts upland game birds with a 12 gauge shotgun she brought from home and targets ptarmigan and grouse. She fly fishes and eats everything she catches and kills.

"You can just sum it all up and say I love the outdoors," Maddalena said. "I grew up in the woods, and I've always seen the great importance of having a good ecosystem."

MAYBE NOT ONLY OLYMPIC CHANGE

While Maddalena wants to make the Olympic team for 2016, she's looking to the future. She plans to use her Olympic shoot-off at Camp Perry, win or lose, to gain experience.

"As long as I have the passion for shooting, I have my eyes set toward the Olympics, so I'm using these last college years and trials as a huge learning curve," Maddalena said. "I have my sights set on the 2020 summer Olympics in Tokyo."

As for Jordan, he expects nothing but great things for Maddalena.

"I've been in the sport for a long time and she's got her mind set on it," Jordan said. "She's a special person, one of the best gambles I've ever taken."

Bill Rozak joined the Union Democrat in October 2006, deciding to move back to his home county 17 years after leaving and graduating from Sonora High School. He is the sports editor and writes, edits and designs pages and tries to catch as many mistakes as possible. He has a passion for all sports. When out of the office, he can be found hiking and rock climbing in the summer and skiing the back country in the Sierra Nevada during winter.