

Track and Field



Kjell Isaksson



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The First Man to Vault over 5.50 m

He was not very tall at 5 ft 8½ in (1.74 m), nor very big at 152 lb (69 kg), nor very fast (10.9 sec in the 100 m). However, the small, fair-haired Kjell Isaksson will be remembered in the history of athletics as the man who first cleared 5.50 m (18 ft. ½ inch) in the pole vault. This event took place in April 1972, in Austin, Texas.

However, this seemingly astonishing achievement could be explained. Ever since Isaksson had finished tenth, at the age of 20, in the Mexico Olympic Games, he had not let a single winter go by without visiting the States to measure himself against the daunting American specialists in indoor competitions. He had emerged from these meetings psychologically well prepared for tough competitions. In addition, in 1972, he had rented an apartment in Los Angeles where, in the company of technicians from a factory manufacturing vaulting poles, he had perfected a pole specially designed for him. Finally, in the space of four years, this physical education teacher had managed to put on 7 lb of muscle, which had enabled him to use bigger and bigger poles and to raise his hand-hold.

Thwarted in Europe by the East German Wolfgang Nordwig, who beat him twice in the European Championships, Isaksson was about to assert himself superbly in his chosen event of the pole vault. The Swede, who on his debut in 1964 had vaulted 3.50 m, was to keep on going higher and higher. He gradually pushed himself up to 5.54 m, then to 5.55 m. Between these two vaults he cleared 5.59 m (18 ft 4 in), but this height was not recognized as a world record, since it had been set in El Paso during a "special" meeting which did not include events other than the pole vault. The victim of a muscle rupture, Isaksson was not, however, able to qualify for the Munich Olympic Games, and retired.

KJELL ISAKSSON

Born Feb. 28, 1948, in Härnösand, Sweden

AWARDS AND RECORDS

1968 OG: 10th with 5.15 m
1969 ECH: silver medal with 5.20 m

1971 ECH: silver medal with 5.30 m

World records:

5.51 m on 8 April 1972 in Austin

5.54 m on 15 April 1972 in Los Angeles

5.55 m on 12 June 1972 in Helsingborg

Kjell Isaksson: he amazed 18,000 Texans