

Rains blind vaulter fourth; inspires others

Written by Butch Burney
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AUSTIN – With braces and a braided ponytail, Rains High School junior Charlotte Brown looks like just about any other 16-year-old. The seeing eye dog and pole vault pole, though, give her away as someone special.

Brown, who is legally blind and can only discern light and darkness, nonetheless jumped her way to a fourth-place finish in the girls Class 3A pole vault at the UIL state track and field meet Friday afternoon at Mike A. Myers Stadium.

Brown cleared 11 feet on her first try to secure fourth place. Last year, she placed eighth in the same event. Kally Long of Wimberley won the event in a state meet record of 13-2.

“As a competitor, you always want to win,” Brown said. “Today wasn’t my best day ever, but I moved up four places. If I can move up four places next year, I can win it.”

Winning a state title would be a spectacular accomplishment. Just being able to vault with virtually no vision is in itself unbelievable.

Brown uses a beeping signal that is placed above the vault box to guide her. Last year, she had a piece of carpet laid beside the lane because she could distinguish it as a guide. However, her vision deteriorated last spring and summer to the point that the contrast no longer helps her.

Brown has acutely sensitive hearing, and the beeping sound is at such a high decibel that not many people can detect it – mostly just Brown and her seeing eye dog, Vador. She uses it to determine how close she is to the pit and when to place her pole.

Even at the state meet, where there were dozens of cameras and video recorders, Brown was able to block out the distractions, though on four of her six jumps, the PA announcer came on the loudspeaker as she stood on the runway, focusing on the beeping signal.

“I was aware there were a few more cameras on me today. As a competitor, you want to block all that out,” she explained. “I wear earplugs when I vault. It may not sound like it makes a lot of sense since I vault off sound, but it helps me to block out some of the extra noise.”

Afterwards, Brown received a standing ovation from the few thousand fans who packed into the stands near the pole vault pits. Then, UIL officials arranged an impromptu press conference so Brown could answer questions.

“As a competitor, your initial reaction is to be down because today I wanted to go higher,” she said. “My initial reaction was, ‘I wish I had made that height.’ But to have everyone stand up and cheering was really cool.”

She is obviously popular with her competitors as she is constantly being talked to in between vaults.

“Vaulting is nerve-wracking as it is, no matter the venue. We’re all serious and we all want to win, but it’s great to have the comradery we share,” she said. “Everyone has the same goal, but we encourage each other.”

Her vaulting coach Derek Smith said Brown’s positive attitude is infectious.

“Words don’t even describe what she does. She is as unbelievable out there vaulting as she is the classroom or just walking down the street,” Smith said. “She’s an amazing girl.”

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“There is nothing she can’t do.”

Class 3A Girls Pole Vault

1. Kally Long, Wimberley 13-2
2. Sydney King, Dalhart 11-6
3. Landsey Sechrist, Spring Hill 11-6
4. Charlotte Brown, Rains 11-0
5. Krystal Ontiveras, Monahans 11-0
6. Lauren Smith, Fredericksburg 11-0