



# history

## Part 1:

# The History of the Pole Vault

by Jan Johnson, Russ VerSteeg and Ray Kring

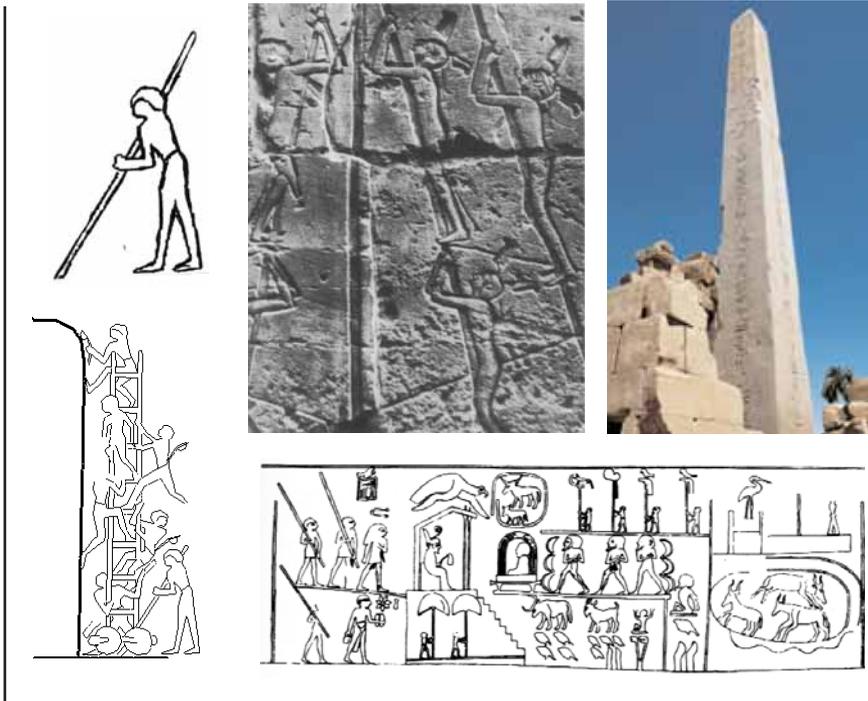
**N**o authoritative evidence proves that any ancient cultures pole vaulted competitively prior to the Tailteann games of ancient Ireland (1829 B.C.). However, artistic representations and other archaeological remains indicate that as early as 2500 B.C. people used long poles for a number of activities, such as farming, boating and warfare. Thus, it's likely that farmers, sailors and soldiers discovered they could use those poles to as a means to leap over a variety of obstacles.

Ancient Egyptian engineers clearly understood the mechanical advantages of poles and ladders by the 4th and 5th Dynasties of the Old Kingdom (circa 2500 B.C.). Relief sculpture depicts the use of such devices for siege warfare to surmount enemy walls, and it is certain that they employed a variety of scaffolding technology to construct their lofty pyramids and elaborate temples. In addition, because



Egyptian farmers developed a network of irrigation ditches and canals to channel the Nile's inundation, it is likely that some enterprising farmer must have occasionally picked up a pole and used it as a makeshift lever to cross an irrigation ditch.

But even more intriguing—and analogous in some respects to early pole vaulting in the modern era—was the art of pole climbing in ancient Egypt. Several relief sculptures show what appears to be acrobats climbing poles as part of a religious



ceremony or ritual devoted to the god Min.

According to Wolfgang Decker in his book, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt*, this cult practice existed as early as the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 B.C.). Therefore, it is fair to say that humans have been trying to defy gravity by means of mere agility and a pole since as early as the Old Kingdom in Egypt.

### Ancient Greece

Although very little has been written about pole vaulting in ancient Greece, it is evident from paintings found on vases found in excavations that the art of leaping with a pole was known to the Greeks of the Fifth Century B.C.

The idea that the Greeks were familiar with the general principles of pole vaulting is further borne out by Johann GutsMuths in a passage from the ancient writings of Greece. “Nestor, to avoid the charge of the wild beast, placed his spear in position and, with great effort, leaped into the branches of a nearby tree. Then, secure in his position, he looked down on the enemy he had escaped.”

According to Cromwell, the Greek word for pole vaulting is translated literally as spear high jump. Gardiner also makes some reference to the event when he says: “Nor is there any evidence for the pole jump. The poles so frequently represented on the vases are merely blunt spears used for practice. A pole or spear was used, as

we have seen, in vaulting on horseback, but not as far as we know for jumping.”

It seems then that although the principle of pole leaping was understood by the Greeks of ancient times, they did not see fit to include it as an athletic event in their Olympic Games. It is interesting to note that in Gardiner's book, a photograph of a vase shows a youth preparing to vault onto the back of a led horse, and he is grasping the pole in exactly the same manner as would a modern day pole vaulter.

Ovid (*Publius Ovidius Naso*) was a Roman poet born about 43 B.C. He is most famous for his *Metamorphoses*, a work filled with Greek and Roman mythology. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 2 lines 785–786, the Latin text says: “...*haud plura locuta fugit et inpressa telurem reppulit hasta.*”

The standard English translation by Rolfe Humphries says: “She [Minerva] said no more, but with the spear as lever, spurning the loathsome ground, took off for Heaven.”

### Ancient Spears: Some of the Earliest Vaulting Poles?

Ancient and Medieval spears and battle poles came in many shapes and sizes. Given the length and strength of many of these weapons, it is logical to assume that, at some point, soldiers must have discovered that they could also use them as tools to negotiate ditches, small streams and creeks, and low walls.

As battle tactics changed, the designs of these implements also changed. Some of the depictions of those spears in ancient art bear a striking resemblance to early vaulting poles of the modern era (the 19th and early 20th Centuries A.D.).

Below is a brief list of some of the types of spears whose length and strength might have made them usable for vaulting over obstacles.

1) **Doru.** The doru was a type of spear in general use in the Hellenistic World (i.e., roughly speaking, the period of several hundred years following the conquests of Alexander the Great: 330–150 B.C.). Although accounts of the weapon's length vary, historians esti-

mate that many were between 2.1 and 2.75 meters long.

- 2) **Xyston.** The xyston was a type of a long thrusting lance in ancient Greece and Macedonia. It measured about 3.5 to 4.25 meters long and was probably held by cavalymen with both hands.
- 3) **Pike.** The pike was a two-handed pole-weapon. It was a very long thrusting spear, used extensively by infantry both for attacks on enemy foot soldiers and as a counter measure against cavalry assaults. Unlike many similar weapons, the pike was not intended to be thrown. The pike was an extremely long weapon, usually 10 to 14 feet (3 to 4 meters) long, but sometimes as long as 20 feet (6 meters). The extreme length of such weapons required a strong wood, such as well-seasoned ash for the pole, which was tapered toward the point to prevent the pike from sagging on the ends.

Although very long spears had been used since the dawn of organized warfare, the Macedonian **sarissa** was the earliest recorded pike-like weapon used in the tactical method described above. The Macedonian phalanx of Philip II (Alexander the Great's father) used the sarissa with great success. Likewise, the Hellenistic armies that followed in the footsteps of Philip and Alexander dominated warfare for several centuries, using the sarissa in a phalanx formation. European armies—primarily foot soldiers wielding them, deployed in close order—used pikes from the early Middle Ages until around 1700 A.D.

- 4) **Hasta.** The hasta was the standard spear used by Roman Legionaires.
- 5) **Trident.** The trident was a three-pronged staff or spear—from the Latin *tridens*, from *tri* “three” and *dens* “tooth.” Both spear fishermen and soldiers used tridents. With it, a fisherman could skewer multiple fish at once. As a weapon, the military liked its long reach and ability to trap other long weapons between its prongs to disarm an adversary.
- 6) **Yari.** The yari were Japanese straight-headed spears. Yari measured anywhere from 3 to 20 feet (1–6 meters) in length. The longer versions were called

*omi no yari* while shorter ones were known as *mochi*, or *tae yari*. *Ashigaru* (foot soldiers) typically wielded the longest yari, while the *samurai* usually carried the shorter versions. Yari shafts came in many different lengths, widths and shapes, typically made of hardwood (*nakae*) and covered in lacquered bamboo strips.

### Pole Vaulting in Ancient Ireland and France

The pole vault was an event contested in the ancient Irish Taliteann Games as early as 1829 B.C. Given the topography of the Irish countryside, it is likely that the need to cross streams, brooks and other obstacles prompted the ancient Celts to try using poles to jump over those natural barriers. Such a practical use logically led to incorporating the pole vault into sporting contests.

The Irish *Book of Leinster*, written in the twelfth century A.D., describes the Tailteann Games held at Telltown in County Meath from 1829 B.C. to 554 B.C. Those same games appear to have continued in a revived form even until 1166 A.D. The Taliteann Games included events, such as stone throwing, pole vaulting, high jumping, the *geal-ruith* (triple jump), the *gaelbolga* (dart throw), and the *Roth-cleas* (throwing a wheel). The traditional founding date for the ancient Greek Olympic Games, by contrast, is over one thousand years later, in 776 B.C. The existence of the Irish Taliteann Games, thus, suggests that organized Olympic-type sports might have come to England directly from Ireland, rather than from Greece and Rome.

The old Norman family name “Scales” dates to the time of William the Conqueror (1066 A.D.), when men who used long poles and ladders to negotiate rock fortresses and walls were called “scalers”. **AT&F**

(Next time: *The Middle Ages and the Birth of Modern Vaulting*)