

AURORA

Nourishing Olympian goals

By Jeff Richardson



Above: **Sagen Maddalena '18** poses for an Alaska Nanooks rifle team promotional shoot at the Patty Center rifle range.

UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

Whenever she'd arrive at the Patty Center rifle range, former Alaska Nanook student-athlete Sagen Maddalena would make a quick note of a collection of pictures along the far wall.

The display offers a chronological record of nearly a half-century of All-American Nanook shooters. It starts with a

black-and-white picture of 1963 national champion John Stuart Watkins, sporting a crew cut and a smile. It currently ends with Rylan Kissell, who earned second-team air rifle honors as a Nanook freshman in 2021.

It's an understated salute to decades of excellence, featuring 35 small photos beneath a homemade wooden plaque. Even so, the display did more than enough to earn Maddalena's admiration during her years at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

"You walked into the range, and on the wall is a picture of all the successful athletes that have come through," said Maddalena, a member of the UAF rifle team from 2013 to 2018. "It's like the legacy wall, and I wanted to be on that wall. Great things come through that team."



Student-athlete Gavin Barnick speaks to coach Will Anti in front of the UAF All-Americans wall during a match against Ohio State University on Oct. 15, 2021, at the E.F. Horton Rifle Range on campus. The Nanooks won with an all-time best season-opening match score of 4,722. They won again the next day against Ohio at the Tanana Valley Sportsmen's Association range in Fairbanks with a new program record-high match score of 4,734. UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

Maddalena proved it herself this summer. She represented Team USA at the Tokyo Olympics, claiming a fifth-place finish in the 50-meter rifle three-position competition.

It continued a remarkable story for the 28-year-old from Groveland, California. She arrived at UAF eight years ago as an unheralded walk-on athlete without much

experience in small-bore rifle competitions. Now her face is among the wall of photos she once studied at UAF.

Her Olympic accomplishment also continues an impressive tradition at UAF. Since Debra (Sinclair) Enger competed at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, UAF alumni have become a fixture on Team USA. **Melissa Mulloy '02** made it to the Olympic finals in 2000. **Matt Emmons '03** shot in four Olympic games, winning gold, silver and bronze medals in 2004, 2008, and 2012, respectively. **Jamie (Beyerle) Corkish '09** competed in 2008 and 2012, claiming a gold medal in London. Between his turns as a Nanook athlete and coach, **Dan Jordan '01, '17** won a silver medal in the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens.





Clockwise from top: Jamie (Beyerle) Corkish, right, tests her medal after winning gold at the 2012 London Olympics. Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Public Affairs; Melissa Mulloy sits for her official Alaska Nanooks rifle team photo in 2001. Photo courtesy of Alaska Nanooks; Dan Jordan, then-coach of the UAF rifle team, visits the Patty Center rifle range in April 2009. UAF photo by Todd Paris.

“It’s just amazing when you think of the legacy we have,” said Mulloy, now Melissa Mulloy-Mecozzi. “You’re talking about 10 students in the basement of the Patty Center, down there planning to make it to the Olympics.”

Elite competition — on the practice range

Nanook shooters say the program's Olympic success is no accident.

The Alaska Nanooks rifle team has earned 10 national championships, including six straight from 1999 to 2004, and boasts a dozen individual NCAA champions. The competition to even make the four-person traveling team can be intense.

Student-athletes compete against world-class shooters at UAF without leaving campus, and that built-in pressure previews the atmosphere athletes face on the international stage.

"There was so much excitement because we were all pushing each other so much," said Jordan, a member of the 1999 championship team. "It wasn't about becoming a good team and winning. It was about being a team that was smashing records and winning big."

Even though she'd eventually compete in the Olympics, Mulloy-Mecozzi said she never felt like the top shooter on the UAF team during her four years in Fairbanks. Future gold medalists Emmons and Corkish said they sought out UAF in part because they wanted to experience the pressure they would get from their teammates.

“I wanted to go to a team that I wasn’t going to walk into and be the best on the team,” said Corkish, who was one of the top junior shooters in the country when she committed to UAF. “I wanted to surround myself with people who were going to make me better.”



Photo caption: Three-time Olympic medalist Matt Emmons, who helped UAF's rifle team win four NCAA championships between 1999 and 2003, delivers the commencement address in 2013. UAF photo by Todd Paris.

"I wanted to be the best I could possibly be, and I saw the way that team worked together was very special," Emmons said. "That was there from the time I walked in to the time I left."

For Maddalena, the journey to UAF required an even bigger leap in competition. While growing up in California she'd competed in service rifle matches, which focus on

making long-distance shots with military-style firearms. She was largely untested in the small-bore and air rifle events that are the basis for NCAA matches.

Her invitation to join the Nanooks required a redshirt year without competition and didn't include an athletic scholarship. Still, she said, getting the chance to compete for UAF, even under those conditions, was a remarkable opportunity.

"I still can't believe it, to be honest, the fact that coach Jordan gave me a shot at being on the team in the first place," she said.

Maddalena did her part to make that decision look good. She was a four-time All-American in air rifle and a three-time All-American in small-bore. She was named UAF's Most Outstanding Female Athlete for the 2017-2018 school year.



Sagen Maddalena poses at the Alaska Nanooks rifle range. UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

She said one key to her success at UAF was the uncommon freedom she had. The ranges at many schools are tightly regimented, but UAF athletes have broad flexibility to practice on their own time. During her redshirt year, she would shoot on her own after the rest of the team held its morning practice, comparing their results to her individual match to see how she fared.

UAF tends to attract self-motivated athletes like Maddalena, an undeniable factor in the team's Olympic tradition, said Nanook coach Will Anti.

“If you’re going to commit to coming to Alaska, you’re a certain breed of person,” Anti said. “You’re willing to be independent, get outside your comfort zone. And there’s no way you can be an Olympian, an elite athlete, without that.”

‘The rifle world is small’

If you look long enough at the wall of All-Americans at the Patty Center rifle range, it starts to feel like connections are everywhere.

The first Nanook Olympian, Debra Enger, has a son on the team today, Daniel Enger. Since 2016, Jordan and Jamie Corkish’s husband, Mike Corkish, have been partners in a thriving brewpub in Idaho. Maddalena trains in Georgia in the same Army unit as **Matt Rawlings ’07, ’08**, a Nanook who competed a decade earlier.

“The rifle world is small,” said Nanook assistant coach Randi Loudin.

Those ties, which go on and on, even steered a pair of ex-Nanook shooters toward medals in 2004.

Before the 2004 Olympic trials, Emmons discovered that his rifle had been sabotaged in the U.S. Olympic Team Training Center locker room. He ended up making the team by borrowing a rifle from a former UAF teammate, **Amber Darland '02**, and went on to win gold with the same gun.

Jordan took a more circuitous path. After being paralyzed in a rock climbing accident in 1999, he took a break from competitive shooting. But he slowly began his return after a Nanook teammate from Sweden, **Joacim Trybom '99, '00**, introduced Jordan to countryman Jonas Jacobsson, the world's top Paralympic shooter. Their conversations were one of the factors that eventually led Jordan to the fledgling U.S. Paralympics team and a silver medal in Athens.

"I was in a very unique situation that I was able to shoot at a high level both before and after my injury," Jordan said, "and it was really fun that we got to be there during the whole birth of that program."

The Olympic legacy extends past the athletes to the staff, which includes several coaches who were Olympians before they arrived at UAF. Between the two of them, former Nanook coaches Dave Johnson and Glenn Dubis shot in every Olympics from 1984 to 2000. **Pat Pitney '90**, a gold medalist in 1984, was an assistant coach for the

Nanooks before eventually moving on to a slightly higher profile role as University of Alaska interim president.



Alaska Nanooks rifle team members stand with their trophy after winning the 2003 NCAA tournament. Photo courtesy of Randy Pitney.

Those historical ties among Nanooks remain surprisingly tangible for current athletes. A collection of names and phone numbers hangs on a locker near the range, allowing today's shooters to contact those from the past for advice or help.

*"I knew it at the time, and it's still true:
The UAF rifle team was a family."*

Maddalena reached out to both Corkish and Emmons for guidance during her years at UAF. After graduating, she even trained with Emmons in the Czech Republic, where he lives with his wife Katerina, a fellow Olympian.

“I knew it at the time, and it’s still true: The UAF rifle team was a family,” Maddalena said. “It’s a big thing. You’re not always going to have shooting, but you’re always going to have each other.”

‘That Olympic dream has been set’

A life in shooting doesn’t end for many Nanook athletes, even after they graduate from UAF.

Mulloy-Mecozzi has coached the Massachusetts Institute of Technology rifle team for the past 11 years, succeeding her father, Jerry. After participating in four Olympics, Emmons now coaches the Czech army team and the U.S. biathlon team. Corkish continued to compete for eight years after graduating from UAF, shooting in two Olympics before retiring in 2014 because of a back injury.

“You learn in college what you want to do, what you want to be when you grow up,” Corkish said. “I knew shooting

was what I wanted to continue to do.”

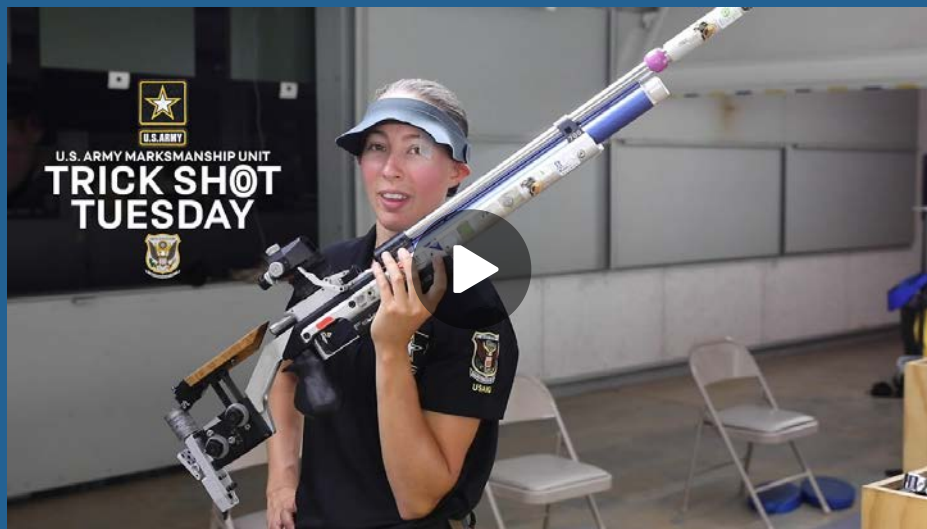
Maddalena is no different. Now a member of the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit in Fort Benning, Georgia, she hopes to extend UAF’s Olympic tradition to 2024. She plans to spend the next three years preparing to compete in the Paris games, fueled by the taste of Olympic competition she got this summer.

“Now that Olympic dream has been set,” Maddalena said. “Before I was like, ‘I want to go to the Olympics and compete with the best.’ Now I want to go to the Olympics and be the best.”



<https://youtu.be/FtPr61nnV4Y>

Former Nanooks rifle team member Sagen Maddalena shoots through a Life Saver candy in a U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit video.



<https://youtu.be/q9cX5Yd-52g>

Maddalena extinguishes a burning match in a video from the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit.



https://youtu.be/QIIfwT_I1MQ

Sagen Maddalena discusses her journey to the Tokyo Olympics during a podcast presentation by the Civilian Marksmanship Program, a national organization that trains people to use firearms and airguns.

