



LD

Ed and Terri Dare spent a decade making pole vaulting safer after the death of their son. Now they are helping other young athletes get their lives back on track through The Kevin Dare Foundation.

By Robyn Passante

Kevin Dare's

POLE VAULTING ACCIDENT

Kevin Dare already had dabbled in several sports, from baseball to football to wrestling, when he decided to tackle something quite different in high school.

“He just came home one day and said, ‘Dad, I want to pole vault,’” says his father, Ed Dare, with a chuckle. “And I said, ‘Kev, go for it, man. I have no idea what that is.’”

Of course, that isn't quite true. Ed was familiar with the sprint, the plant, the vault and the landing of the oddball track and field sport. But he didn't know pole vaulting like he knows it today. Now, Ed knows about mat standards and measurements. He can describe the preferred landing zone and explain what a vault box collar is. He can tell you about the high-tech material used in the world's first pole vault helmet, which his foundation helped to design.

Today, Ed knows pole vaulting with the grief-driven passion of a father who lost his son to the sport. In 2002, Kevin was a 19-year-old Penn State sophomore with a naturally athletic build and an easygoing demeanor that belied his competitive spirit. His pole vaulting ambition already had proven fruitful. As a member of the State College Area High School team, he had won the 2000 Pennsylvania Interscholastic

Athletic Association (PIAA) state championship in the pole vault, and at the end of his freshman year at Penn State he'd become the U.S. junior champion, clearing 16 feet, 6¾ inches.

On the afternoon of Feb. 23, 2002, Kevin sprinted toward the vault box at the Big Ten Indoor Track and Field Championships in Minneapolis. He was hoping to clear a relatively easy 15-foot-7-inch bar. But as soon as his pole catapulted him into the air, something went terribly wrong.

“Nobody really knows what happened,” says Ed Russell, a close family friend of the Dares and now director of The Kevin Dare Foundation. “He lost his way. He fell straight down into the pit.”

At the time, the plant box was nothing more than a V-shaped steel casing, and Kevin fell face first onto it from 15 feet in the air.

His father was filming the event. He and his wife, Terri, never missed a meet.

“As a parent you think, ‘Oh, thank God our kids are involved in athletics, and they're safe and they're not doing drugs,’” says Terri, who still tears up at the mention of that day. “You never think that there's going to be an athletic accident.”

Kevin was rushed to a nearby hospital, where he was pronounced dead. The meet was canceled, and the Dares flew home the next day. Penn State's former Athletic Director Tim Curley was waiting for them at the airport. “Tim came up and hugged me, and the first thing I said to him was, ‘We gotta change this sport,’” Ed recalls. “So from the minute that it happened, I don't know why, but I had to have something to take away the grief.”

With little fanfare but a clear vision, The Kevin Dare Foundation was born.

“As a parent you think, ‘Oh, thank God our kids are involved in athletics, and they're safe and they're not doing drugs.’ You never think that there's going to be an athletic accident.”

~ TERRI DARE

Eddie Seese, a 40-year pole vaulting veteran and former Penn Stater, knows a thing or two about changing the sport. In the early 2000s, Seese was serving as chairman of a task force on improving pole vaulting safety, a group put together by the American Society for Testing and Materials. The task force had run studies and made recommendations about how to reduce the number of pole vaulting injuries, but their ideas hadn't gained traction. And then Ed Dare came along, and he brought with him not only Kevin's story, but the stories of two American high school pole vaulters who had died within a few months of Kevin's accident.

"In 60 days we were able to get accomplished what we hadn't been able to do in years. Years," says Seese, who pole vaulted on the 1967 Penn State track and field team. "When Ed talked, everybody listened. Who was going to argue with somebody whose son just died?"

That year, Seese's task force, with the support of Penn State Intercollegiate Athletics and the newly formed Kevin Dare Foundation, convinced the NCAA to make some changes, including increasing the size of the landing pad and other mats and requiring padding around standards, like the planting box on which Kevin's skull had been crushed.

"Instead of honoring the way Kevin died, we wanted to honor the way Kevin lived."

~ ED RUSSELL

At the same time, the foundation and Penn State researchers teamed up with Enventys to create the first pole vault-specific helmet and with SKYDEX Technologies to design a Soft Box, a safer alternative to the standard steel box for pole vault takeoffs. "A helmet, a Soft Box and a box collar would have



saved [Kevin]," says Seese, who continues to train pole vaulters and runs a track and field equipment supply business in Arizona.

Designing, testing and funding the production of such cutting-edge products were important victories for the Dares, who held annual golf tournament fundraisers and continued to gather with Kevin's friends and his older brother, Eric, each year to commemorate Kevin's birthday and the anniversary of his death. But the foundation's biggest challenge was convincing schools, coaches and organizations to use them.

"Ed ran into the PIAA, he ran into the NCAA, nobody wanted to make the changes," Russell says. "He spent a lot of his own money to make pole vaulting safer, and basically nobody wanted to make the change."

Ed says his passion for safety never waned, but his frustration for the lack of interest grew. What the Dares wanted was for the

NCAA to make helmets mandatory, but they admit even Kevin probably wouldn't have worn one unless it was required. The idea was not a new one. The USA Track and Field Pole Vault Safety Committee had recommended helmets be made mandatory in 1996. But just about everyone seemed resistant to the change.

Before they knew it, a decade had passed since Kevin's death, and the brick wall they seemed to be hitting was starting to leave bruises that wouldn't heal. Terri decided to make one last-ditch effort, contacting HBO Sports, "Good Morning America" and "Inside Edition" — which had featured their story when Kevin died.

"I said, 'I really want to see if we can get back on. It's 10 years later, we want to come on; we want to tell about the safety.' But everybody just wants the gory part of the accident. They don't want the good outcome," Terri says.

“So I think that was when we said, ‘OK, this is not working. We have 3,500 helmets, we have Soft Boxes developed. We can’t get schools to use them. We can’t even give them away. What are we doing?’”

It was a fight from which Terri was especially ready to walk away. “Every time you do something with the helmet or the Soft Box, it’s a constant reminder that that’s what took his life,” she says.

// CHANGING THE VISION

In 2012, the Dares were frustrated and weary. They had made great strides in their decade-long fight to make pole vaulting a safer sport, but the victories seemed hollow. That’s when a foundation volunteer pointed out something to them that now seems obvious.

“He said, ‘If Kevin was around, Kevin would not be pushing pole vault safety,’” Ed recalls. As the couple thought more about their son’s zest for life and plight to help the underdog, a new focus began to emerge.

“Instead of honoring the way Kevin died, we wanted to honor the way Kevin lived,” Russell says.

What seemed to fit with this new vision was the idea for a college scholarship to be given to a student athlete who had suffered a serious illness or injury. Called “Life ... Back on Track,” the program was launched in 2013 when its first scholarship recipient, Lynnette Henshaw of Hammonton, N.J., began her freshman year at St. John’s University, with her tuition paid for by The Kevin Dare Foundation.

Henshaw was a former star jumper on the track team whose battle with non-Hodgkin lymphoma all but derailed her senior year of high school. She was sidelined from her senior track season, but still managed to graduate fifth in her class of 330 students in June 2012, despite the fact that the year

leading up to and following graduation had been filled with chemotherapy, radiation, surgeries and a stem cell transplant. Henshaw’s mom, Louise, says the athlete in her daughter helped her prevail. “They said she broke the record for getting out of the hospital in record time after getting a transplant,” Louise Henshaw says. “I think being an athlete played into that.”

Ed says Henshaw was the ideal recipient of a scholarship bearing Kevin’s name. “To hear her story, you couldn’t have picked a more perfect role model,” he says. The foundation is set to pay her tuition bill — which stands at about \$30,000 per year — for the first four years of her six-year



The Dare family: Eric, Ed, Terri and Kevin, taken August 2001.

program in pharmaceutical sciences, for which she will earn her doctorate.

“I knew I wanted to be in a field that I was able to help people,” Lynnette Henshaw says. “Now that I went through treatment, I think when I graduate I want to do a residency with an oncology pharmacy.”

Today, two more college students have joined Henshaw in getting their lives back on track with the assistance of Kevin Dare Foundation scholarships — Cole Benovy, a former swimmer who attends Penn State, and Tyler Vitello, a former football player who attends Montclair State University.

Terri knows that, although Kevin would hate that the foundation was named after him, he would love what it does. “This feels right because I think that we’re making a

difference, and it’s not about the accident anymore,” Terri says. “Now it’s just to keep Kevin’s memory alive and to have that help other people.”

It has been a dozen years since he died, but Kevin’s name and legacy live on: There is The Kevin Dare Invitational, a huge high school invitational held at Penn State’s indoor track each January; the annual Kevin Dare “Heart of the Lion Award,” given to a high school track athlete who demonstrates courage, sportsmanship and leadership; the newly opened Kevin Dare Memorial Lounge at the Penn State indoor track; and The Kevin Dare Memorial Golf Tournament, which raises money for the foundation’s scholarships. On Oct. 17, the foundation will host a new fundraiser with workout celebrity Shaun T, best known for his fitness programs Insanity, Focus T25 and Hip Hop Abs. Money raised from the group workout will help fund the scholarships.

“We’ll give out as many scholarships as we can afford,” Russell says.

And beyond the foundation, there is a new legacy. “Our grandson is named Kevin,” Terri says,

dabbing at her eyes. “We have another Kevin Dare — Eric’s son, who’s 9 months old.”

No scholarship or namesake can bring back the son they lost. But for taking on a sport in which you rise and then fall, the Dares have somehow managed to flip that trajectory in a way that is both beautiful and inspirational.

“I just really admire them for taking something so tragic and turning it into something where they can help other athletes who are struggling,” says Louise Henshaw, who understands the palpable fear of losing a child, but not the horror of it happening. “I think it’s amazing that they can put their energy into such a positive thing to help other people.” •