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Making A Hole In The Sky

Shotputter Maren Seidler has solved the problem of being a Big Person in a grand way

Kenny Moore

Just now, I am concerned about food," says Maren Seidler.

"Ah, the big F," says Brian Oldfield. "You have mentioned it a few times."

"A couple of things at Zot's would be great. Grilled things."

"And don't forget the wet things," says Carol Seidler from the back seat.

These three are careening about the interior of Oldfield's 1972 Pontiac Grand Prix that you have to stick your finger through a greasy hole in the side to unlock. The car soars and whacks over the road back to the California coastal hills, escaping the flatland of Stanford University's stadium, where Oldfield and Maren Seidler have encouraged each other through three hours of training for their common calling, putting the shot. Oldfield's throw of 75 feet in 1975 is the longest in history with the standard 16-pound shot. Seidler is the American women's record holder with a throw of 62'3¼" with the 4-kilogram (8.8 pounds) women's shot.

"I crave music," says Maren, switching on the radio. "Classical in the mornings, to awaken with clarity. Rock before training to really blast. Rhythm and blues at night."

Billy Joel cries out that only the good die young. On hearing this, Oldfield places an imaginary revolver to his temple, blows his brains out, and slumps over the wheel. The car drifts over the center line, then over the left shoulder. In a spray of gravel it comes to rest in the parking lot of the Alpine Inn Beer Garden, formerly named Rossotti's.

"Ah, Zot's," Carol Seidler says languidly. The tavern, which is a historical monument, has a 14-foot snakeskin on the wall, sloping floors and graffiti carved 3/16 of an inch deep in the tables. Its scale is somewhat larger than life, at least until Oldfield, too evil to die, leads the Seidlers within. Maren is the shortest of the trio at 6'2".

Oldfield goes and gets the first schooners of beer. Thick, protein-rich sandwiches arrive and are eaten. Later a waiter comes to take away glasses, asking if that will be all.

"What, you think you won already?" says Oldfield. "We can drink more by accident than your best customers can with dedication."

"Uh-oh, Brian," says Carol. "I think you have a fan."

Oldfield looks up. Making her way toward the table is a freckled, smiling young woman wearing a faded logger's shirt that is so worn that its front doesn't hold together too well. Oldfield assumes an expression of joyful expectancy.

"Oh, God, Brian, don't encourage her," says Maren.

Instead, Oldfield intensifies his unctuous smile of welcome, but it slowly fades as it becomes clear that the girl is attracted by Maren's World Cup sweat shirt.

"Were you in *the Games*?" she asks with a tremor of anticipation.

"Yep," says Maren, suddenly edgy.

"Oh, that's wonderful. What did you do?"

"I'm a shotputter."

"Oh, that's *wonderful*," says the girl, but there is a pause while consternation almost causes her eyes to cross. "Is...is that with the pole?"

"No, it's with the cannonball."

"Oh...that's wonderful."

When the girl has gone, Maren sighs. "Female solidarity, isn't it heartening?" she says.

Maren Seidler is the best female shotputter in American history. At 27, she has won 15 national titles, indoors and out, and this past summer raised her own national record five times, starting at 56'7". Yet for most Americans the presence of this large and powerful woman in their midst is less cause for praise than curiosity. Besides giggly displays in restaurants, people stop and gape at Seidler on the street (she knows because sometimes she spins to catch them in mid-gawk). Distilled, the most polite of their questions have to do with how a balanced and intelligent girl ever came to take up shotputting.

There is sense to such a question, because even a male athlete is expected to chalk up success, to define himself through whatever he loves to do, before about half the people he knows stop telling him to quit wasting his time. So for a female beginner in an event calling for muscle, and mass, and *grunting*, for God's sake, it must take a wondrous internal sureness to begin and persist and improve.

Or it takes a guide. Walt Seidler is 6'9" and 265 pounds. When his two daughters—Maren, who is named after her maternal grandmother, and Carol, who now stands 6'3½"—were born a year and a half apart in Brooklyn, he soon knew they would be tall. "I did a work-up based on the theory that a baby girl at 18 months will measure one-half her adult height. They both seemed sure to make six feet. Maren got there before she was 13. I knew the world was cruel, that anyone who is different will be teased, so I did my best to counteract that at home. Height was something to be *proud* of."

Walt Seidler encouraged his daughters to take up athletics to prove that length of limb has its advantages. Both girls swam, but Carol soon lost interest in athletics. "Carol is a natural athlete, but competition wasn't her bag. With Maren it took more work. And I sort of knew, with that swimming thing you kind of lost yourself in the pool. So one day in 1965 when Maren was 13, I said, 'You see this iron ball? I think with this you'll see all the countries of the world.' "

With her father as her coach, Maren Seidler broke the 12-13 age-group record for the six-pound shot by six feet in her first meet, putting 46'6".

Three years later she was in the Olympics, finishing 11th at Mexico City. "It all came so easily," she says now. "The rewards were nice, the travel, the friendships. It wasn't the satisfaction of doing it. It was what it got me." Rewards accrue to 11th-placers as well as to champions, so Seidler was moved to go on, but not too far up. "I was told I had great potential," she says, "but I had no direction. There were no real women's programs at colleges in 1969. Some California schools asked me to come, but I like Boston, so I went to Tufts, even though it had no women's track team."

Seidler, who majored in anthropology, turned to the shot only occasionally—a month or two before the national championships—and went on accumulating U.S.A. sweat suits and whirlwind visits to Leningrad, Paris, Tokyo and Dakar. In 1968 she won the shotput at the AAU championship by throwing 50'3¾". At that time the world record of 61'3" was held by Nadyezhda Chizhova of the Soviet Union. Ten years later, when the world record, held by Czechoslovakia's Helena Fibingerova, was 73'2¾", Seidler had only reached 56'7", a relative loss of 4'8½". Her plight—winning year after year in the U.S., yet losing year after year by ever greater margins to Eastern Europeans—reflected the contrast between the two regions' social and scientific views of women.

"People's ideas about femininity crystallize when they're faced with the issue of lady shotputters," Seidler says.

Seidler remembers her childhood much as her father does, believing that he prepared her to let society's disparagement slide from her back. "I'm always asked for horror stories," she says. "Either I'm not easily shocked or I don't have any. People always say, 'You seem so happy with yourself,' as if I'm supposed to be a tormented individual, but I've always been comfortable being big. I've had to spend time talking about it way out of proportion to my concern about it, because so many people are interested in that aspect."

Relatively few people are emotionally drawn to the act of casting an iron ball out of a seven-foot circle. "Even if it's done well, not many spectators get much out of seeing it," says Seidler, "so they tend to attach things. Social questions. Politics. I'm a performer, and with a crowd behind me I respond and throw better. But I'm uncomfortable with 'You gonna beat that Russian lady?' "

Yet in saying this, Seidler, trained so happily to be herself, hesitates. "No matter what I tell you otherwise, I care about approval," she says, "about what people think. Carol and I prided ourselves on our independence. We said, 'We're different, but we like it this way and we don't give a rip what anyone says.' But maybe we did give a rip. For years when people would write about me and about my blue eyes, I would say, 'Why put that muck in?' But secretly I was pleased. So there must be an internal dichotomy at work here."

So it seems, and that would be interesting even if Seidler had only gone on putting 55 feet and collecting her plane tickets. But she didn't. After the September 1977 World Cup meet in Düsseldorf, she stayed on in Germany to train with Christian Gehrman, adviser to Al Feuerbach, the former world-record holder in the shotput, and to Mac Wilkins, record holder in the discus, and coach of Eva Wilms, the former record holder in the pentathlon. "Christian was available, good, and had issued a standing invitation to come and be coached," Seidler says. "I'd had another blah year. I just finally got tired enough of the same old thing that I was either going to do it right or stop. I didn't want to stop, so I floated a loan from my father

and went to Munich. My 10-year vacation was through."

Was it ever. In the finest Teutonic tradition, Gehrmann works with few athletes, but supervises them in exacting detail. "He said, 'Maren, expect you will be very down for the first six to eight weeks,' " Seidler says. "It was overload in everything. Tons of sets, tons of reps, lots of hard running. There were some mornings that it took 15 minutes to put my pants on. My lower back was sore. It took me a long time to sprint because of big knots in my thighs."

It was a crash program to turn Seidler into the complete athlete all fine shotputters need to be. As simply a strong and big woman, Seidler had been more the cliché of a shotputter than the actual fact of one. The best shotputters cannot be immense creatures. They would lose too much quickness and control. Feuerbach is 6'1", 240 pounds. Oldfield is 6'4", 255. Sumo wrestlers weigh a hundred pounds more. Fibingerova is 5'10½", 198. Thus, in part, the demanding training was designed to pare 25 pounds of suet from Seidler. "I literally ran my butt off," she says. "Twice a week we had to do all-out 600-and 800-meter runs. I'd get going and feel so tired that I was sure if I didn't hold my form I'd fall on my face. Christian was amazed. 'Maren, this is very *good*' he said." She recalls that moment with warmth. "The butterball could *run*."

"It sounds like drudgery," she continues. "It was drudgery, but I was sustained by Christian's *caring*." Seidler improved her time for 60 meters from 10.3 to 8.1. After four months she put the shot 60'1". A month later she did 61'2¼". "I wasn't a great deal stronger, but the difference was in my mobility. You have got to be able to control the body to put the shot."

Then last spring she came home to California, where she had been loosely based since 1973. On her first day back, Oldfield tried to go easy on her in a 60-yard dash, and Seidler beat him. "Would you just look at how that woman has rearranged her molecular structure," Oldfield said.

"Rubenesque no more."

Maren and Carol lived on a hillside above the gleaming poison-oak thickets of Portola Valley, in the hills behind Stanford. In this serene place, Maren spoke of her decision to honestly discover her limits. "Linus van Pelt in *Peanuts* once said, in anguish, that there is no heavier burden than a 'great potential.' Amen. In school I got good grades without much effort, but I could have done so much better. Some of it was not wanting to accept the risk of not doing as well as it seemed I could. When I get encouraged to write [by members of the sports department of the *San Jose Mercury News*, where she is a copy person], I get paralyzed. What if it isn't good?"

The German training may have been the first time Seidler, a perceptive adult, had experienced the lesson that most athletes get knocked into them as children: if you go all out, the struggle takes on more meaning than the result. "There is a satisfaction in being the first American woman 60-footer," she says, "but the real satisfaction is very private and hard to talk about. It's having for the first time...taken the chance. It's made me giddy. It's made me open and ready to really enjoy this throwing, and a lot else."

There is something inconsistent about the best male shotputters, as if they have less than their share of the combative instincts of other big men. Dallas Long, the 1964 Olympic champion, quickly became a gentle dentist. Randy Matson, the first 70-footer, was too mild, many thought, to get the most out of his gifts. Feuerbach is a poetic, inward man. And Oldfield... There is where the pattern breaks, you say. Didn't the police in Galveston, Texas explain why they had come at him with drawn guns by saying, "Because nightsticks weren't having any effect"? Yes, they did, but a close study of Oldfield tends to reveal him as a man in a mask. The barroom brawler is a role perfectly played by a splendid character actor, a character that may have trapped Oldfield.

Last year Oldfield lived in a cabin far above the Seidlers on the crest of the mountain between the lower San Francisco Bay and the Pacific. He had been working as a furniture-store manager since the professional International Track Association, in whose meets he competed, folded in 1976.

One day, after the wet spring, several steers were standing up to their knees in the spongy pasture, their tails lying flat on the sod, as Oldfield stretched on his porch and spoke of Seidler's return. "She's new *energy*" he said, exultant. "People aren't ready for *strong* big women." He said he sensed a new ease between them, perhaps because Seidler's commitment to their craft now approached his own. As he talked he began to toss a stick for a neighbor dog, a rangy black Lab that has earned the name Echo for its willingness to bring things back.

As the dog retrieved the stick from increasing distances, Oldfield began to take an interest in the game. He broke down an oak branch as thick as an ankle. "I'm going to surprise the hell out of you, dog," he said, and threw the club completely over the pasture. For a moment it seemed the missile would carry to the distant bay—"the inferno," as Oldfield calls the cities below—before it dropped into a far clump of wild rose. As the dog worried it free, Oldfield remarked that his appeal to be reinstated as an amateur competitor had been denied, leaving him, the consummate thrower, with no place to throw.

The dog returned with the muddy branch clenched in his mouth. Oldfield sent him crashing down the hill once more. "Demented creature," he said, grinning. "I love it." He spoke of his plans for constructing a throwing area. "At Stanford we have to keep cool. The jogging classes laugh at shotputters because when you put the shot you grunt. But up here...."

The dog struggled back up the hill. Oldfield seized the branch and threw it 20 feet farther than before, into woods. "You can't keep this up!" he shouted after the racing animal.

"Up here," he went on, "we would be free. Free to put on our bikinis and grab our shots and try to punch that hole in the sky."

The dog crawled back up the flowered slope and, trembling, dropped the branch at Oldfield's feet.

"Once more," said Oldfield. He strapped on his sandals and calculated where his feet had to go, the heft of the chunk of muddy wood, then did his shotputter's spin, his own invention, and sent the branch shooting out low and whistling, the steers raising their heads, the dog panting after.

"God, I love to throw," Oldfield said.

Poised as they seem in the ring, elsewhere shotputters become out-sized outsiders, and therefore alert observers. They cleave to their own kind, whom they often refer to as Big People. With time and trust, however, it is possible to become an honorary Big Person for an evening. Such was a night at the Portola Inn, where a friend of less imposing dimensions was invited to join in the feast of ribs, crab, lamb, steak, salad, rice, cottage fries and cheesecake.

Carol and Maren discussed their peripatetic childhood. When they were youngsters, Walt Seidler's construction business had taken them to New Jersey, Long Island, Georgia and back to New Jersey. "At one point we both went to P.S. 102 in Brooklyn," said Maren. "Which all the Westerners think is heartless—to give a school a number. California schools are all Skylark at First Dawn School, or Shady Oak Grove and Babbling Brook Free Junior High School."

"These are not Big People coffee cups," said Carol. "You can't get a finger through the hole of the handle."

"The world's weakest strongest man," Maren said fondly, nodding toward Oldfield, who, defeated by the ribs, was dozing. "I do think size has a lot to do with not being aggressive. Society won't accept that from Big People; it's too much, with a big body, to be aggressive. Big People are expected to be mellow. It's the only way we can be managed."

She mused on the variety of responses which size occasions. "Letters are funny. Most are positive in their kind of hysterical way, like 'How strong are you?' but some have the tone of a closet trip: one guy wanted to write what sounded like a pornographic weight-lifting book." These diverting missives seem to come in flurries, she said, following bursts of publicity. A stack arrived after a *Strength & Health* article. "It fabricated things, like my arm-wrestling men for drinks in bars, and there was the usual 'Gorgeous in an evening gown...'"

Oldfield came quickly upright in his chair. "I sure am glad I ain't a *girl!* Always having to primp and shave and worry about my figure...." As the Seidlers howled in delight, he returned to slumber.

"There was this little girl, maybe eight, who watched me lift weights in the San Jose Y," said Maren. "After I was done, this child came up to me and said, 'You're really *strong*,' in the most impressed, respectful way. I was startled that she had not by then learned it wasn't encouraged. I deduce from that that things are getting better."

Seidler won the 1978 AAU women's shotput by seven feet, saying, "I know very well why there are no American women challenging. We understand what it takes to be a good thrower. Sure we know you have to be strong and quick and explosive, but it's the *potential*, the kind of improvement that's possible with years of work, that we don't grasp. The U.S. vs. U.S.S.R. meet isn't competitive experience, it's just getting buried."

It used to be. But in the U.S.-Soviet meet in Berkeley last July, Seidler beat 1972 Olympic discus champion Faina Melnik-Veleva with her 59'9¾", though she finished second to Svetlana Melnikova's 61 feet. "It was good, close competition," said Seidler. "For the first time, when I went into my last put, it mattered."

Seidler returned to Germany to train with Gehrman, made her American-record put of 62'3¼" there, then won at an eight-nation meet in Tokyo. Now she is back in California, living in a hillside home in Los Gatos. Asked if she could deal with *real* success, say 75 feet, she rolls her eyes in dismay. "Maybe you get used to it, the media glare," she says, shuddering. "Now Brian, it's wonderful for him. He *wants* attention. I just want to find my minor hole in the sky."

Soft winter grass grows up among the seats in Stanford's great earthen bowl of a stadium. Perhaps it is this that makes it a sound-absorbent place. It is hard to hear across as Oldfield and Seidler warm up with the Stanford track team. Seidler eventually stops jogging and stretching, puts the silver rings she is wearing in her warmup shoes and spends an hour throwing different weight shots, trotting purposefully after them.

Oldfield appears pained at Seidler's form, her slow deep bend at the knees before launching herself across the ring. He wants a shallower, quicker start, a snapping summation of forces. "It's just a dance step," he says, "and you're a hell of a dancer."

"You're right," she says. "I still use the form I developed from weakness. At least now I have a *sense* of what's right. I'm starting to think of myself as an athlete."

She does 60-meter sprints in 9.0, 8.9, 8.8. "I still don't much like running," she says, flushed, "but look, I'm getting little baby hamstrings."

She does standing long jumps, with Oldfield measuring each one. Seidler does 2.56 meters (8'4¾"). Then she turns to standing triple jumps, which

call for balance as well as explosive leg power. She does 7.38 meters (24'1").

Payton Jordan, the Stanford coach who was the 1968 Olympic head coach, strolls by. "How's it going, men?" he asks.

Seidler doesn't bat an eye. "Jumping well," she says.

As the shadows lengthen and the Stanford athletes drift away, Seidler begins to do five-hop series of frog leaps into the sand pit.

"My best for these is 12.80 meters," she says. "What will you give me for 12.85?"

"A nickel," Oldfield volunteers.

"That's inspiring."

"A beer on the way back."

"Lemme jump." Seidler lands well into the sand and grabs the steel tape measure. "Damn. 12.83."

"I think you're getting older," says Oldfield. "I speak from experience."

Her fourth try is only 12.66.

Payton Jordan walks by again. "Take care, men," he says. "I have to go."

"One more try," says Seidler.

"I've never seen you so thirsty," says Oldfield.

She hits 12.80 and runs up the runway, shouting, "I gotta do one more!" She must be filled with the certainty that field athletes relish, that it's just *there*. The perfect pop. *This* time.

Seidler leaps again, keeps a steady rhythm to her five springs, and lands 13.31 meters from her starting point.

"An amazing new PR [personal record]!" she announces as she flops onto the cushiony pole-vault pit and wrenches off her sand-filled shoes. "And on the sixth try. Normally I'm *fix und fertig* to quit by three.

"Now I want a beer," she says. "You know this isn't hard at all if you're getting good at it." She notices for the first time that they are alone in the dim stadium. "I bet Payton's locked the gate," she says. "We'll have to climb over."

"That's part of it," says Oldfield. They rattle up the 10 feet of chain-link fence like a couple of very agile bears. It seems a good time to slip away, while these Big People are hung up there in the twisted wire atop the fence, still held in the act of doing, and all their judges damned, or, better yet, blissfully forgotten.

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