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Teen Tests Internet's Lewd Track Record

California High Schooler Allison Stokke, 18, Becomes a Victim Of Unwanted Attention After Photo Is Posted on a Sports Blog

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NORWALK, Calif. -- Early this month, 18-year-old Allison Stokke walked into her high school track coach's office and asked if he knew any reliable media consultants. Stokke had tired of constant phone calls, of relentless Internet attention, of interview requests from Boston to Brazil.

In her high school track and field career, Stokke had won a 2004 California state pole vaulting title, broken five national records and earned a scholarship to the University of California, yet only track devotees had noticed. Then, in early May, she received e-mails from friends who warned that a year-old picture of Stokke idly adjusting her hair at a track meet in New York had been plastered across the Internet. She had more than 1,000 new messages on her MySpace page. A three-minute video of Stokke standing against a wall and analyzing her performance at another meet had been posted on YouTube and viewed 150,000 times.

"I just want to find some way to get this all under control," Stokke told her coach.

Three weeks later, Stokke has decided that control is essentially beyond her grasp. Instead, she said, she has learned a distressing lesson in the unruly momentum of the Internet. A fan on a Cal football message board posted a picture of the attractive, athletic pole vaulter. A popular sports blogger in New York found the picture and posted it on his site. Dozens of other bloggers picked up the same image and spread it. Within days, hundreds of thousands of Internet users had searched for Stokke's picture and leered.

The wave of attention has steamrolled Stokke and her family in Newport Beach, Calif. She is recognized -- and stared at -- in coffee shops. She locks her doors and tries not to leave the house alone. Her father, Allan Stokke, comes home from his job as a lawyer and searches the Internet. He reads message boards and tries to pick out potential stalkers.

"We're keeping a watchful eye," Allan Stokke said. "We have to be smart and deal with it the best we can. It's not something that you can just make go away."

On May 8, blogger Matt Ufford received Stokke's picture in an e-mail from one of his readers, and he reacted to Stokke's image on instinct. She was hot. She was 18. Readers of Ufford's WithLeather.com -- a sports blog heavy on comedy, opinion and sometimes sex -- would love her.

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The picture was taken by a track and field journalist and posted as part of a report on a California prep track Web site. The photo was hardly sexually explicit, which made Ufford's decision to post it even easier. At 5 feet 7, Stokke has smooth, olive-colored skin and toned muscles. In the photo, her vaulting pole rests on her right shoulder. Her right hand appears to be adjusting the elastic band on her ponytail. Her spandex uniform -- black shorts and a white tank top that are standard for a track athlete -- reveals a bare midriff.

By targeting his comedic writing to 18- to 35-year-old males, Ufford has built a sports blog that attracts almost 1 million visitors each month. Ufford writes tongue-and-cheek items about the things his readers love: athletes and beautiful women. Stokke qualified as both. She was, therefore, a "no-brainer to write about," Ufford said. He posted her picture and typed a four-paragraph blurb to accompany it. *Meet pole vaulter Allison Stokke. . . . Hubba hubba and other grunting sounds.*

"I understand there are certain people who are put off immediately by the tone of my blog," Ufford said. "Every week, there's somebody who takes offense to something, but that's part of being a comedy writer. If nobody is complaining, it probably wasn't funny. You are hoping for some kind of feedback."

By that measure, Ufford's post about Stokke created a landmark for success. He received a handful of angry e-mails, including one from the photographer who threatened to file suit if his picture of Stokke remained on the blog. But Ufford also attracted a record number of visitors in May, thanks largely to Stokke's picture. More than 20 message boards and 30 blogs copied or linked to Ufford's item.

From her computer at home, Stokke tracked the spread of her image with dismay and disbelief. She had dealt with this once before, when a track fan posted a lewd comment and a picture of her on a message board two years earlier. Stokke had contacted the poster through e-mail and, a few days later, the image had disappeared. But what could she do now, when a search for her name in Yahoo! revealed almost 310,000 hits? "It's not like I could e-mail everybody on the Internet," Stokke said.

For the first week, Stokke tried to ignore the Internet attention. She kept it from her parents. She focused on graduating with a grade-point average above 4.0, on overcoming a knee injury and winning her second state title. But at track meets, twice as many photographers showed up to take her picture. The main office at Newport Harbor High School received dozens of requests for Stokke photo shoots, including one from a risqué magazine in Brazil.

Stokke read on message boards that dozens of anonymous strangers had turned her picture into the background image on their computers. She felt violated. It was like becoming the victim of a crime, Stokke said. Her body had been stolen and turned into a public commodity, critiqued in fan forums devoted to everything from hip-hop to Hollywood.

After dinner one evening in mid-May, Stokke asked her parents to gather around the computer. She gave them the Internet tour that she believed now defined her: to the unofficial Allison Stokke fan page (<http://www.allisonstokke.com>), complete with a rolling slideshow of 12 pictures; to the fan group on MySpace, with about 1,000 members; to the message boards and chat forums where hundreds of anonymous users looked at Stokke's picture and posted sexual fantasies.

"All of it is like locker room talk," said Cindy Stokke, Allison's mom. "This kind of stuff has been going on for years. But now, locker room talk is just out there in the public. And all of us can read it, even her mother."

An impostor created a fake profile of Stokke on Facebook, a social networking site intended mainly for college students. Stokke's classmates at Newport Harbor High School started receiving Facebook messages that seemed to be from Stokke -- except she typed in Southern jargon and listed her interests as only "BOYS!!!!"

Last week, Stokke wrote a complaint letter to Facebook, and it immediately took down the fake profile. She hasn't contacted any other Web sites, she said. Allan Stokke, a defense attorney, studied California's statutes so he would know if he saw or read anything about his daughter that went beyond distasteful to illegal.

"Even if none of it is illegal, it just all feels really *demeaning*," Allison Stokke said. "I worked so hard for pole vaulting and all this other stuff, and it's almost like that doesn't matter. Nobody sees that. Nobody really sees me."

Last Friday night, Stokke stood underneath the stadium lights at Cerritos College here, 20 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles. A few thousands fans had come to watch a postseason meet, and dozens of photographers and cameramen roamed the field. Before her first jump, Stokke tried to control her breathing as she chatted with her coach. A good jump here would qualify her for the state championship in Sacramento.

A former gymnast, Stokke had tried pole vaulting as a lark as a freshman in high school. Two months later, she set a school record. She won the 2004 state championship three months after that. Stokke had augmented her natural, pole-vaulting disposition -- speed, upper-body strength and courage -- by lifting weights three times each week. College programs including Harvard, Stanford and UCLA also recruited her.

During her meet at Cerritos College, Stokke cleared 11 feet, then 12 feet, then 13 feet and qualified for the state meet. By the time she stared ahead at a bar set 13 feet 6 inches, all other nine pole vaulters had maxed out. Stokke warmed up by herself, the only athlete left.

She loved pole vaulting because it was a sport built on intricacies. Each motion required calculation and precision. A well-executed vault blended a dancer's timing, a sprinter's speed and a gymnast's grace. "There's so much that happens in a vault below the surface," Stokke said.


As the sun set Friday night, Stokke positioned her pole as if she were jousting and sprinted about 100 feet toward the bar. She ran on her tip-toes, like she'd learned from ballet. As she approached her mark, Stokke bent her pole into the ground and coiled her legs to her chest. She lifted upward, twisting her torso 180 degrees as she passed over the bar. It was a beautiful clearance, and the crowd stood to applaud.

Back on the ground, her vault accomplished, Stokke smiled and took in the scene around her. In the stands and on the field, she was surrounded by cameras. And for a second Stokke wondered: What, exactly, had they captured? And where, exactly, would it go?

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