

people to know

HAMMER TIME

A Florida structural engineer and university professor designs with and teaches steel for work—and slings it for fun.

TOM SPUTO likes throwing things. Heavy things.

Sputo is the president of Sputo and Lammert Engineering in Gainesville, Fla., a business he's run since first moving to the town 25 years ago. He's also a structural engineering professor in the Department of Civil and Coastal Engineering at the University of Florida as well as the technical director of the Steel Deck Institute. Oh, and he happens to be an accomplished hammer thrower.

When it comes to sports, especially some of the less-publicized ones like the hammer, it's not uncommon to hear people say that they got into it because one of their parents was once into it. With Sputo, who was a runner in college, it was the other way around.

"My daughter was a shot and discus thrower starting in sixth grade through high school," he recalls. "During her junior year in 2007, I decided to start throwing with her. I started with the shot put and discus and soon added the weight throw."

A couple of years later, one of his daughter's coaches convinced him to take up the hammer, as his size (5 ft, 8 in. "on a good day" and 215 lb.) would not be as much of a disadvantage as with the shot put and discus, which require more brute strength and size.

The hammer, by comparison, relies more on technique, Sputo explains, adding that it's a much more complex sport than it would seem.

"It's all about acceleration," he says. "Power production, not strength—how fast you can produce that force. You can't force the hammer, you have to let it move you. But you have to stay strong enough to counter it. You don't so much throw it as you do push it. After four years, I'm finally getting to the point where I'm pushing it, not dragging it."

The men's hammer is a 16-lb ball (usually steel) at the end of a 47.75-in. handle-and-wire assembly; at age 50, men "graduate" to throwing a 13.2-lb ball (Sputo is 53). The idea is for the thrower to spin his or her body—and the hammer, in a "low-to-high" orbit—in an effort to gain as much accelera-

tion as possible. There are three-turn and four-turn throwers (Sputo is a three-turner) and at the end of the last turn, the thrower releases the hammer, at as close to 45° as possible, and records where it lands—ideally far from the throwing circle and within the 35°-wide landing sector. There's typically a primal roar at the release point.

The open world record for the men's hammer throw is 86.74 m (284 ft, 7 in.). Most years, the best throw in the 50-54 age group is about 52 m (170 ft). Sputo's personal best is 39.12 m (with the 13.2-lb ball) and his goal is to hit 40 m and be ranked in the top 20 in the U.S. for his age group by the end of the year (he's currently hovering around the top 10, but his season is almost over and as he breaks from competition, others will likely move up).

Sputo typically competes in eight to 12 meets a year, which are organized by USA Track and Field and the National Senior Games; Masters track and field events start at 30 years old and he notes that there are competitors into their 90s and even past 100. While he competes at the Masters level, he also competed at two collegiate meets this year, finishing third out of 18 in one of them.

"It's a nice accomplishment to beat some of the college boys occasionally," he says. "At any meet, I'm always the smallest male hammer thrower, giving away three or more inches in height and 30-plus pounds, so I'm pretty happy with the results."

His training regimen consists of four to six days a week of throwing and weight training two or three days after throwing. He has about 1,000 lb of weights at home and can "yell and scream" in the garage without alarming anyone too much, although he said he does get some strange looks when he drags weights down the street on a sled. Currently, he practices throwing at a local city park. He insists that he's good about not hitting dogs or other visitors with his weighty projectiles.

"I look forward to my training, he says. "It gives me something to look forward to at the end of the day. Any day that you can throw is a good day, no matter the results." **MSC**



▲ Tom Sputo and hammer, stationary and in mid-throw.