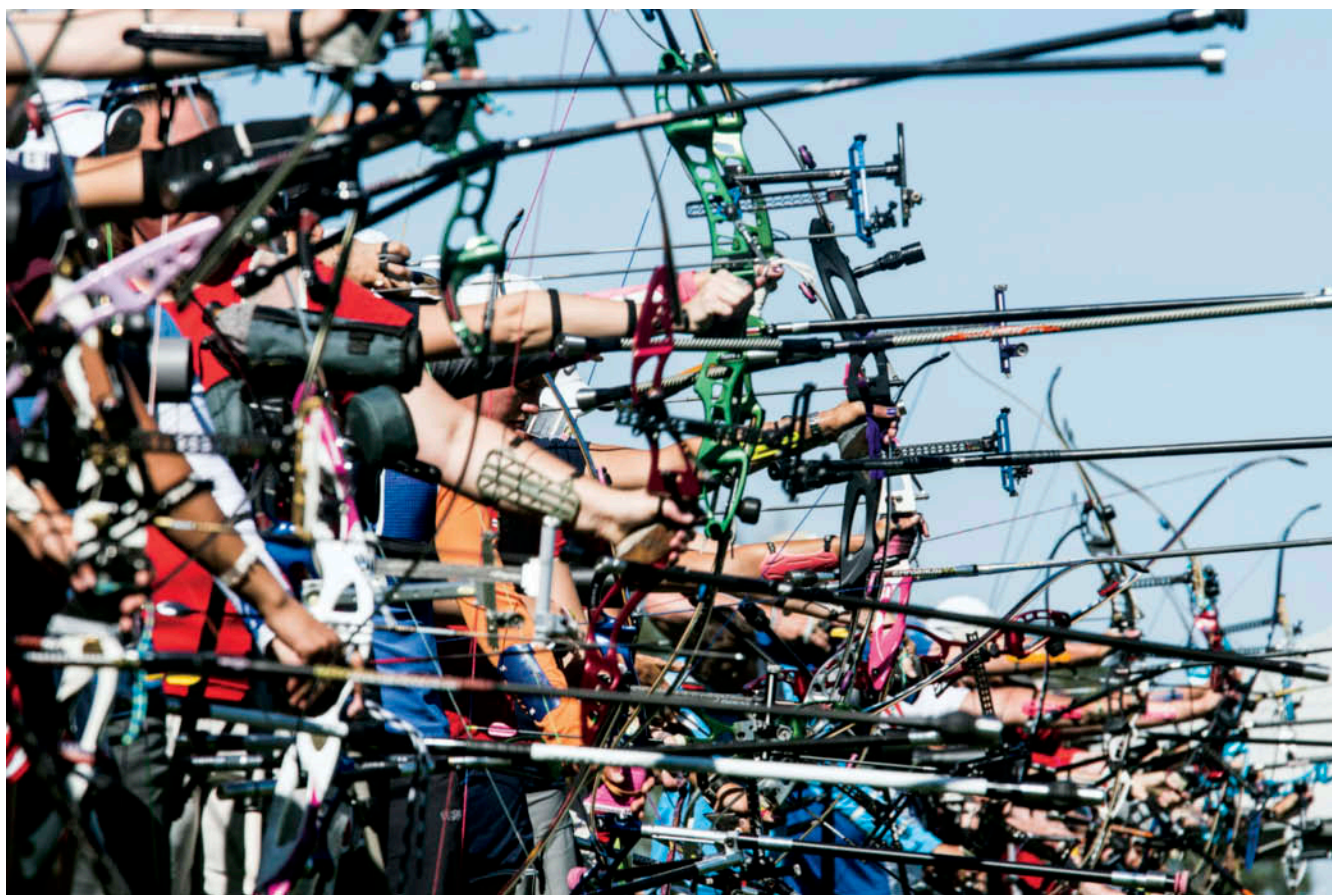


ARROW HEADS

Living in archery
By Reeves Wiedeman



When an Olympic archer readies to shoot, she is staring down a distance of seventy meters—roughly three quarters of a football field—and aiming to hit a circle the size of a CD. An elite archer does not grip her bow tightly, fearing what anxious jitters might do; she attaches it to a string that wraps around her hand, extends her arm forward, and holds the bow in place with the skin

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between her thumb and index finger. As she draws, more than forty pounds of resistance weighs on her fingers and back, and her bow stores so much energy that if she were to fire without an arrow the bow could break at both ends. The physical strain is never evident on her face, which remains in stern repose as she brings the string back to the same spot on her lips as the shot before and the shot before that. It presses against her mouth, pulling it into a frown, as if she were afflicted with a temporary bout of Bell's palsy.

She must hold steady—moving her release point by more than the width of a ballpoint pen would result in a miss. This is difficult enough on a good day, but arrows are not bullets. They dip under the weight of raindrops and veer in a gust of wind, which can force an archer to aim entirely off the target, a compensation process that has been referred to by the acronym S.W.A.G., which stands for Scientific Wild-Ass Guess. Once an archer is confident in her position, her chest and shoulders will stretch ever so slightly—a moment known as expan-

sion, which is attributed variously to breath, a muscular contraction, or a shift in blood pressure. At this point, her skeleton is aligned from her left hand, which holds the bow, to her opposite elbow, which is behind her ear. A tiny mechanical clicker on her bow will snap, letting her know that everything is in its proper place, and it's time to let go.

When an arrow is loosed, it does not fly straight; it wriggles like an eel. From bow to target, it will arc to a height of about ten feet, traveling at

none would recommend trying to shoot an apple off anyone's head, they are confident in their ability to do so without bloodshed at anything less than a hundred yards.

Or so it should go. "Something isn't right," Mel Nichols, an Olympic coach, said as he watched Khatuna Lorig, one of the best archers in the world, shoot earlier this year. She had just pulled the string to her lips, induced a frown, and then lowered her bow without firing. Lorig is a native of

this month in Rio de Janeiro. Archery is in the middle of an unprecedented boom: membership in USA Archery, the sport's national governing body, has quadrupled since 2011, and youth participation has quintupled. But more shooters means more competition, and because archery is a sport with almost no margin for error, both within an individual shot and over a career, Lorig was in danger of not making the Olympics if she couldn't get it together.



150 miles per hour, and arrive at its destination in one second. To anyone standing along its path, a passing arrow sounds like a viper hissing as it leaps forward to bite its prey. The archer stands and watches, a portrait of serenity hiding a tremor, while her string bounces back and forth like a snapped rubber band. Her bow, still attached to her hand, tips gently forward, as if genuflecting before what is almost certainly another well-struck bull's-eye. Olympic archers regularly split one another's arrows, and though

Georgia, a former Soviet republic, and a five-time Olympian with three countries, most recently the United States. She has long blond hair and an aquiline nose that stretches toward her target, and was wearing a skintight Nike T-shirt that was apparently not skintight enough: she had attached a safety pin to keep any loose fabric out of her string's path. Lorig took a deep breath, raised her bow again, and held steady for ten seconds.

Lorig was preparing to try out for the Olympics, which will take place

A full minute went by before Lorig finally loosed an arrow, which missed her target, wide right. "If you're confident, you step up there, you shoot, and you're done," Nichols said, shaking his head. "That's either panic or anxiety, or maybe it's a little bit of both." An elite archer told me that the tension between body and mind is so great that during a competition he once lost the feeling in his arms. All archers can do is try desperately to keep their thoughts from spinning entirely out of control.

The Easton Archery Center of Excellence, which is, by general consensus, the world's most excellent archery center, sits on eleven of the 155 acres that make up the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, California. To the west of the archery range is a BMX course, and to the east, beyond several beach-volleyball courts and a field for javelin, discus, and shot put, is the Lower Otay Reservoir, home to America's top rowers. To the south is Mexico. "You see border patrol a lot," Collin Klimitchek, one of the fifteen archers, including Lorig, who live and train at the O.T.C. year-round, told me when I visited in February. "There's been a couple of times when four-wheelers were flying all over the place looking for people." Should Donald Trump become president and his wall prove too expensive, one could imagine him asking America's best archers to put their skills to a more traditional purpose. "Then maybe we could get the government to fund us," Guy Krueger, one of the USA Archery coaches, joked.

The \$29 million archery complex, which opened last October, was built not with taxpayer dollars—the United States Olympic Committee is privately funded—but with the largesse of a foundation run by Jim Easton, the CEO of Jas D. Easton, the world's largest archery-equipment company. Plans for the range had been in the works since the mid-2000s, but America isn't in the business of backing losers, and U.S. archers weren't winning any medals. "If you don't medal, you don't exist," Krueger told me. The archers were left with a field on the southern edge of the O.T.C., even closer to the border, which they shared with the occasional rattlesnake.

The team's performance improved in 2012. The men won a silver at the London Olympics, and Lorig finished fourth—the best result for an American woman since 1988. More surprising, archery was the most watched sport on cable during the first week of the Games, topping even basketball. "The numbers for archery have been nothing less than huge," Alan Wurtzel, an NBC executive, said at the time, speculating that "maybe it's *The Hunger Games* phenomenon." The first movie in the series, which starred Jennifer Lawrence as an arrow-flinging revolu-

tionary, had opened earlier that year, as had *Brave*, in which a Disney princess wields a bow, and the first Avengers film, featuring Hawkeye, whose superpower is the ability to fire a bow with complete disregard for both proper archery form and the laws of physics. By comparison, archers praise Lawrence's technique, which she refined over ten hours of training with Lorig.

Now more than 20 million Americans pick up a bow every year, from hunters to yuppies on Groupon dates. An archery class I attended in Brooklyn was largely made up of young couples, plus a middle-aged woman who walked up to her target and snapped a photo of an arrow that had struck the bull's-eye.

ARCHERY WAS THE MOST WATCHED SPORT ON CABLE IN THE FIRST WEEK OF THE GAMES. "THE NUMBERS HAVE BEEN NOTHING LESS THAN HUGE"

"For my future ex-boyfriends," she said. Jay McAninch, the head of the Archery Trade Association, has seen cultural booms before—Rambo helped push the rise of bowhunting in the Eighties—but the industry hoped that this time would be different. In particular, McAninch wants to avoid the fate of fly-fishing, which saw an explosion in interest after *A River Runs Through It* until new fishermen realized that buying a rod and waders did not transform them into Brad Pitt. To help archery retailers cater to the expanding demographic, the A.T.A. recently published an article titled "What Motivates the Healthy, Happy, Hipster Hunter?"

Guns made bows largely obsolete for their intended purpose by the seventeenth century. (Historians note an exception: China, where archers were so highly skilled and well equipped that they continued to prove useful in battling nomads on the open steppe.) It turned out that many of the archers at the O.T.C. came from hunting back-grounds. Klimitchek, who grew up in rural Texas, said that were he better at it, he would prefer to shoot a rifle, and Sean McLaughlin, who moved to the O.T.C. with his twin brother, Daniel, said both of them "liked shotgun, but

figured this would be a little cheaper." (Archers get to reuse their ammo.) Observing a practice, I noticed that the attire among the group was red-state collegiate—a far cry from the bucket hats and long sleeves worn by archers from other countries—which meant sneakers, shorts, and bald-eagle belt buckles holding up American-flag quivers. (Backpack quivers are impractical for anyone but Errol Flynn.)

Zach Garrett, a twenty-one-year-old from Missouri who is one of America's top-ranking male archers, keeps his hair in a sidelong swoop, his lips in a boyish grin, and his Star Wars socks mismatched—Darth Vader on the left and a Stormtrooper on the right. "If I'm being honest, I got into archery after I saw the Lord of the Rings," he said. Like most of the resident archers, Garrett moved to the O.T.C. after the 2012 Olympics, and has rarely left since. Easton built a dormitory overlooking the range—athletes in other sports were stuck in older housing elsewhere on the campus—so that the archers would never be far from their bows. Six days a week, Garrett and the rest walk to the range around eight in the morning and spend most of the next eight hours shooting 300 arrows, which they keep track of on the type of clicker used by bouncers at popular nightclubs. "Whoa, Hawkeye!" a young boy in a football jersey yelled as he walked by on a tour of the O.T.C. None of the archers reacted. "I thought Legolas was badass," Garrett said, referring to Tolkien's elf, who once slid down a staircase loosing arrows into half a dozen orcs. "Now I just stand still and shoot things, so it's not really as badass."

Many of the resident athletes move to the Easton Center when they might otherwise be going off to college, which means that practice, during which the archers shoot side by side, has the air and humor of a locker room without the sweat or any serious injuries. When I asked LaNola Pritchard why she had a Band-Aid on her chin, she said that she had a "bow hickey"—which prompted Chris Webster, a former demolitions expert in the army who, at thirty-two, was the second-oldest O.T.C. resident after Lorig, to point out that his beard was going white at the precise spot where his string touched it.

On a balcony looming over the scene was Kisik Lee, the team's head coach, who was silently filming the practice on an iPad. Lee came to the United States in 2006, after winning eight gold medals as a coach for his native South Korea, the dominant power in world archery. Korea has won every women's team gold medal since 1988, and three of the past four men's golds. Lee's directive was to translate that success to American archery, but his tenure got off to a rocky start. When he first arrived at the

standardization was to recommend that all USA Archery coaches begin training students in a twelve-step shooting process that he had developed in consultation with a biomechanical engineer.

Such heavy-handed instructions were met with some initial resistance among the peewee archery set, but Lee's strict system was more familiar to Lorig, who was shooting by herself at the O.T.C., fifty feet away from the others, wearing a navy-blue bucket hat and headphones. ("If you were forty, and you

team also uses a computer program that develops mental strength, but without the shocks.) The importance of psychological fortitude was apparent when Lorig went to her first Olympics, in 1992, as part of the Soviet Unified Team (consisting of athletes from the defunct U.S.S.R.). She was eighteen, four months pregnant, and managed to win a team bronze medal.

But as the Soviet sports apparatus fell apart, Lorig was left on her own. She trained by candlelight in her mother-in-law's basement—"Georgians live together, like Italians," she said—while her newborn slept. She competed for Georgia in the 1996 Olympics, and decided that she didn't want to leave the United States. "I lived where everybody goes first," she said. "Brooklyn." She stopped shooting and worked odd jobs—at a toy store, in a gym—to support her family. "Everything was kind of hard, just struggling to every day survive," Lorig said, in her still-stilted English. "I only knew 'hi,' 'bye,' and f-word." She did not see her parents for two years.

Eventually, Lorig moved to New Jersey, where she found an archery range and began training again while continuing to work full-time. She represented Georgia once more, in the 2000 Olympics, but her life had begun to fall apart—"divorces, kids growing"—which made an archery career even harder. She watched the 2004 Games at home.

Two years later, after becoming a U.S. citizen, Lorig moved into the dorms at the O.T.C., leaving her son back with family in New Jersey. She qualified for the 2008 Games, at which her immigration story, and a fifth-place finish, earned her the honor of carrying the American flag during the closing ceremony. (Russian troops were occupying parts of Georgia at the time, so some viewed her selection as a political statement.) Lorig got the Olympic rings tattooed on her forearm, saying that she could think of nothing that defined her more. "She's been competing longer than we've all been alive," Sean McLaughlin said.

There is nothing physically preventing Lorig from continuing as a professional archer—her 2008 teammate, Butch Johnson, made his last of five Olympic teams at fifty-two—but younger competitors have been catching up to her. American men had already secured spots for a full team of



O.T.C., Lee began holding Bible-study sessions, and he sponsored the baptism of several athletes, saying that a strong sense of faith could help quiet an archer's mind and that he found it difficult to coach athletes who did not believe that a divine presence might have some influence on their arrows.

Lee was forced to stop proselytizing after a critical article appeared in the *New York Times* during the 2008 Olympics—it didn't help that God had not guided American arrows to any medals—but the archery community was even more rankled by Lee's efforts to institute a measure of rigid control, as is found in Korea. When Korean children learn archery, in elementary school, they spend up to six months perfecting their form in front of a mirror before picking up a bow. "If we tried to bring that system here, you would lose kids," Guy Krueger told me. Lee's attempt at a less tedious form of stan-

were training with people half your age all day, you'd get sick of it, too," Zach Garrett said.) When she first tried archery, in sixth grade at a state-sponsored archery school in her hometown of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, Lorig was required to spend eight months drawing a bow in front of a mirror without loading an arrow. "You know how we got mentally strong?" Lorig said. "There was a small dark room, and we were strapped into a chair, and we had to watch this monitor with two lines and a square. The square was your heart rate." Lorig's coaches turned off the lights and started sporadically playing loud noises over a speaker. If Lorig jumped, and her heart rate spiked, she would get a shock on the wrists. Lorig said she got so good at the exercise that her coach had to turn up the voltage.

The point was to show archers that the key to success is as much mental as physical. (The American Olympic





three in the Rio Olympics, but the women were guaranteed just one spot, with a chance to qualify a team in June. After the first of three U.S. Olympic trials, held last September, Lorig was in fourth place. The top rank belonged to Mackenzie Brown, a twenty-one-year-old from Texas, who had seen Lorig as one of her role models while she was growing up. They were now sharing a two-room suite at the O.T.C. One afternoon, as I watched Zach Garrett shoot, I told him I was surprised that Lorig had continued to stay at the dorms. “See, that’s the thing,” he said, after setting his bow on the ground. “Some of these people who are really good, they don’t have anywhere else to go.” Lorig was off shooting by herself, with her headphones plugged in again, blocking out any distraction.

Watching an indoor-archery competition feels like sitting under a skylight during a rainstorm; the constant thwack of strings and the low thump of arrows hitting targets produces a steady beat. The National Indoor Championships, held at the Easton Center in February, was an especially cacophonous event, with a hundred contestants firing. They represented the archery world’s constituent parts: There were college teams, retirees, and teenagers reading science textbooks between shots, which suggested that the watchful parents in the stands were primarily interested in how “national archery champion” would look on a college application. Many of the bows were taller than the people who shot them.

Lorig, Garrett, and several of the other O.T.C. residents stood together in the middle of the range. They were using the particular type of bow required by the Olympics, a recurve, so called because it bends back toward the target at each end. Recurves have been around for thousands of years—some scholars say that there’s one in the *Odyssey*. Top-of-the-line modern recurves are made with the same synthetic foam that allows submarines to withstand extreme pressure, and come tricked out with sights, wind gauges, and bayonetlike stabilizers.

A recurve is simple, however, compared with a compound bow, which was invented in 1966 by Holless Wil-

bur Allen, a hunter in Missouri who sawed off the ends of a recurve and ran the string through a pulley system that gave his arrows more speed. The compound is now the most commonly used bow in America because it is the choice of hunters, like Paul Ryan, the Speaker of the House, who once posed for a *Time* magazine photo shoot in a suit and tie with a compound bow at full draw. (Ryan has taken up restructuring the excise tax on arrows as a pet cause.) Though compounds aren’t permitted in the Olympics, any type of bow was allowed in the National Indoor Championships, so Lorig was shooting next to a man who looked as if he were trying to bag several deer.

Whatever the bow, all archers aim at a target with a bull’s-eye, worth ten points, surrounded by concentric rings, each worth a decreasing number of points. In competition, archers shoot three arrows in a row, after which they score their own shots along with another archer, who provides a check on any cheating. When a mark is too close to call, a judge is summoned to examine it with a magnifying glass. Garrett recently won a match after a judge pulled out a pair of calipers and determined that his arrow had landed millimeters closer to the center than his opponent’s.

Lorig won in her category by eight points, a landslide, but the victory was largely meaningless. The National Indoor Championships didn’t count for her Olympic ranking—Mackenzie Brown had skipped the competition to attend a mental-training seminar—and netted her just \$2,000. Financially speaking, Olympic sports divide into three categories: those like basketball or soccer, for which the Games hardly matter; prestige events like gymnastics and track, in which a strong performance can mean six- or seven-figure endorsement deals; and everything else. “Everyone in our program I would consider a ‘professional’ archer, but no one’s getting paid,” Chris Webster, the former soldier, said over lunch in the O.T.C. cafeteria, where the archers were commiserating with a member of the women’s rugby team about their crappy gear. Archery companies sometimes do pay archers if they win certain tournaments, but not much. Guy Krueger, who trained at the O.T.C. in the early 2000s, said, “I had an average of probably less than twenty

dollars in my bank account for probably two years.”

Every professional archer has a side hustle. A former O.T.C. resident made extra cash as a stunt double for an episode of *CSI: Miami*, in which someone was murdered by bow and arrow. One member of the silver-winning 2012 men’s Olympic team, Jacob Wukie, found work as a restaurant inspector, and another,

“When they go to competitions, they fly business class!” he said. Given that GE and Apple were unlikely to start sponsoring U.S. archery teams, Lee hoped for government support. Korean archers who win an Olympic gold medal are awarded a pension for life—Americans get \$25,000—while several European countries give archers do-nothing military jobs.

pseudo-celebrity would give novice archers something to aspire to, in the same way that young basketball players can dream of a shoe deal with Nike. But it was unclear exactly how well he was doing. Some archers suggested that his income had inched into the six figures, but a friend of Ellison’s told me his guaranteed sponsorship money was less than half that.



Jake Kaminski, runs an archery company with his wife near their home in Gainesville, Florida, where he was training for Rio. Lorig once spent six months driving a cab in Los Angeles. After coaching Jennifer Lawrence, she had been able to recruit a stable of students, but that hardly paid enough to live on. “If not for archery, I would probably be married and milking the cows in Georgia,” she said with a shrug. After a failed attempt to secure an endorsement deal with Celestial Seasonings, which sells a Tension Tamer among its varieties of herbal tea, Lorig finally landed her first campaign with a non-archery brand in April: Bridgestone put her in a commercial to show how far its tires could go after she pierced one with an arrow.

The world’s only true archery salaries are in Korea, where Coach Lee estimated that two hundred or so archers receive upwards of \$50,000 to compete for professional teams sponsored by companies like Hyundai and Samsung.

“Brady’s the only one doing it for a living,” Chris Webster said. “You know, the twenty-foot guy on the wall?” He meant Brady Ellison, who led the American men’s team in 2012 and has his face emblazoned on a mural in the Easton Center’s lobby. Ellison’s forearm is covered in tattoos marking his Olympic appearances in Beijing and London, and he plans to wrap another around his elbow for Rio. Beyond his archery talent, Ellison has both the rugged image that appeals to companies catering to survivalists—he killed a bear with a bow when he was eleven—and a television-friendly personality: after winning a competition, he headed for a young woman waiting on the sidelines (now his ex-wife), grabbed her by the waist, and kissed her, bow still in hand. “I think the crowd should be pumped up and cheering,” he told me. “You win a big tournament, don’t act like your grandma just died.” The hope was that Ellison’s

Other archery careers never got off the ground. One day at the O.T.C., Lorig was visited by her son, Levan, with whom she had been pregnant at the 1992 Games. Lorig coached Levan for years, hoping that they might become the first mother–son duo to qualify for a single Olympics in any sport, but Levan broke her heart two years ago, when he sold his bow to buy a car. He now had a girlfriend, and hadn’t shot in months. When a friend tried to explain to Lorig that, for an American child, your twenties are a period of exploration rather than commitment, Lorig couldn’t quite understand. “He dreams about the Olympics,” Lorig said. “But it takes a lot more than just talk and shooting arrows once in five months. I don’t take off. I live here. I live in archery.”

To observe the archery boom’s grassroots, I went to Balboa Park, in the center of San Diego, and met several members of the

San Diego Archers. The club's main range is in a canyon squeezed between the zoo, a freeway, and the San Diego Museum of Man, and bisected by a bridge. "One evening a couple years ago, I was shooting at a target under the bridge," Patty Koutz, the group's secretary, told me. "And I hear someone yell, 'Hey! I just saw this movie that had archery in it, and I decided I wanted to



try it, and then I come walking across the bridge and here you are.'"

The man had seen the first *Hunger Games* film. Since then, the group's membership has tripled, but Koutz said the series was just one reason for the expansion. The club now has a number of soldiers—archery is sometimes used as a treatment for PTSD—and others who got into the sport for its meditative value. (*Zen in the Art of Archery*, the 1953 book by Eugen Herrigel, a German philosophy professor, is a foundational text in the mindfulness movement.) Koutz is a fiftysomething molecular biologist. When we met, she wore earrings in the shape of the earth, and she said that when she joined, in 2008, she had been one of many people taking to the sport as a way to bond with nature. She showed me around the range, which was set up like a golf course amid a forest of palm trees and cacti. Once a month, the club arranges a series of foam targets in animal shapes. "We've

got elk, skunk, goats, bobcat, bear," she said. For a recent competition, they had attached a pig to a zip line. Koutz had taken a class to learn how to build her own wooden longbow, and said that she gets most of her enjoyment out of shooting with gear she made. Plus, she explained, "A lot of people are realizing this is a sport where you don't have to be especially physically fit."



That was something I had noticed in Chula Vista, where the archers were taut in the forearms and back but did not fill out their T-shirts. Olympic archers walk four or five miles a day to retrieve their practice arrows, but weight lifting isn't required. (Some is recommended for general fitness, and to prevent lopsidedness: archers report that the muscles on their right sides are much larger than those on their left.) The World Anti-Doping Agency administers drug tests to archers, but most at the O.T.C. couldn't imagine anything having much effect on them. "Weed, maybe, to help you relax?" Webster suggested. One archer had heard of parents feeding their children ginseng root to increase focus, which you can read more about in "Effect of Ginseng Preparation for Improvement of Cerebral Blood Flow in Professional Archers." The only real way to tell an archer from a member of the general population is to get a good look at

her hands. "This is what happens when you shoot a bow," Lorig said, showing me the three fingers on her right hand that she uses to draw her string. They were covered in as many calluses as a lead guitarist's and noticeably fatter than the fingers on her left.

The range of body types that fills archery's elite ranks was enough to get a guy dreaming about his own

prospects. Jennifer Lawrence had gotten good in just ten hours with Lorig, and the actress Geena Davis nearly qualified for the 2000 Olympics after two years of practice. If I devoted myself to archery for the next four years, I began to wonder, was a trip to Tokyo in 2020 a possibility?

For answers, I called Hoyt Legal, in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, and asked for Thomas Stanwood, a lawyer at the firm. Stanwood had shot compound bows as a child, but then gave up the sport until 2009, when he went to law school and needed a diversion. He picked up a recurve for the first time at thirty-two, and a month later finished fifth at the 2010 Indoor Nationals. Two years after that, he nearly qualified for the Olympics. "It's not that difficult to get pretty good at archery," Stanwood said. He had an understanding boss, an even more understanding wife, and, as of a year ago, a back yard large enough to fit a seventy-meter range. After dropping

archery for two years to focus on his legal career, he was now shooting two hours a day after work, which was far less than the archers in Chula Vista, but enough to put him in sixth place after the second stage of the U.S. Olympic trials in April.

As for my Tokyo hopes, Stanwood said that, in a matter of months, most anyone could become a very, very good archer. Becoming an Olympian was a more difficult task, and more difficult to explain. Stanwood, for starters, seems to be something of a savant when it comes to noncardiovascular competition: he is a scratch golfer and a pool shark, and played competitive video games before that became a more lucrative career than professional archery. “The thing that’s gonna take you to my level is some *thing* that can’t necessarily be taught,” he said, comparing firing a bow to an internal symphony whose movements only work as a whole. “How do you teach that?” he said. “People have to learn that for themselves.”

“**Y**ou’re sick,” Ed Lucero, who helps run the Easton Center, told me when I returned for the second night of the National Indoor Championships. Lucero is something of a Don King figure for San Diego archery, tasked with promoting the sport—he signs his last name “Loose-Arrow”—but even he seemed to recognize its limitations. “If you have no vested interest, this is terrible to watch,” he said. “Even parents will tell you that after fifty arrows, they’re falling asleep.” A scan of the bleachers confirmed as much, as did one parent’s reaction when an award was given to her child: “Thank God. Now we can leave.” The most exciting moment during the entire three-day event came when everyone was startled by a loud pop: a man had fired without loading an arrow, and his bow snapped.

There was general agreement that more explosions would be good for the sport. “It would be cool if, when somebody shot a thirty”—three straight bull’s-eyes—“they had fireworks coming out of the target,” Collin Klimitchek suggested. Archery as a spectator sport has been in decline more or less since the eighteenth century; croquet was often deemed more interesting to watch. Archery was included in several early Olympics, but disappeared from

1924 to 1972 because the world’s archers couldn’t agree on a set of rules. Twenty years later, the Olympics introduced a head-to-head format; individual matches were divided into games, like in tennis, to make the competitions more exciting. But this can still be a tough sell to audiences, since even archers need binocular scopes to tell exactly where their arrows land—Swarovski scopes are the bling of the archery world—and on television, it’s impossible to track an arrow’s path. Lucero thought that perhaps NBC could adopt something like the glowing puck that was briefly used to track movement during televised hockey games, an idea that is largely considered one of the great follies in modern sports television. (Wurtzel, the same NBC executive who shouted the sport’s praise in 2012, put the excitement in perspective by noting that “archery is the new curling.”) The qualification round, which consists of each archer shooting seventy-two arrows, is a soporific process, and the organizers in London scheduled the event for the morning before the opening ceremony. Archers find themselves with a lot of downtime, and during the National Indoor Championships, Lorig checked Facebook on her phone, played with a dog that a friend had brought, and finished an entire sleeve of Ritz Crackers. Garrett’s girlfriend brought him leftovers from the Cheesecake Factory.

As with most eccentrics, American archers tend to be comfortable with their position on the fringe. They view most mainstream encroachment with skepticism, and admit that an activity often used to relax the mind is not likely to become a fixture of sports broadcasting. Archery is meant to be a pursuit, not a performance, and even the most impressive shots make for quiet entertainment. All the action happens inside an archer’s head, and until ESPN hooks up archers to a brain scanner, there won’t be much for spectators to see.

That didn’t stop one fan from trying to get a better view by flying his drone over the range at the final U.S. Olympic trials, held on Memorial Day in central Florida. (Officials forced him to land it.) The field had been narrowed to eight archers of either gender. Mackenzie Brown led the women’s

pack, while Lorig had dropped to fifth place, two spots out of Olympic contention. It was ninety degrees, and all of the archers wore T-shirts and shorts; to keep the rising sun out of their eyes, many had attached small pieces of paper to their baseball caps. On the men’s side, Zach Garrett, Brady Ellison, and Jake Kaminski nabbed the three spots to compete in Rio as a team and as individuals. Lined up among the women, Lorig was using a new bow painted like an American flag, and after several months of disappointing performances, her decades of Olympic experience finally came through. She took first place in a series of elimination matches, beating Brown along the way; by the end, she’d leaped into third, behind Brown and Hye Youn Park, a Korean archer who received her American citizenship just last year.

The three advanced to a tournament in Turkey in mid-June—their last chance to qualify as a team in Rio. During the quarterfinals, against Ukraine, Lorig was the final American female archer, and she needed a bull’s-eye to stave off elimination. She stepped up to shoot, pulled the string against her lips, but then she hesitated, and lowered her bow. When she finally fired, her arrow sailed wide. Mackenzie Brown would be the only American woman going to the Games. Lorig’s effort to reach another milestone had also been thwarted: a few weeks earlier, two pistol shooters from her native Georgia qualified as the first mother-son pair to compete in a single Olympics.

Before the trials, each of the archers had already begun to face their uncertain futures. Klimitchek planned to enlist in the military; the McLaughlin twins wanted to go to school. Zach Garrett had started a stabilizer company with an archer who had a degree in aerospace engineering. All felt sure that they wanted to move as far away as they could from life inside the dorms at the O.T.C. Lorig remained an exception. “You look at Khatuna, and longevity’s not really limited to what your body can do,” Garrett said. “It’s limited to how willing you are to put off the rest of your life.” Lorig told me that she plans to be back for 2020, and beyond. “Of course I’m not quitting,” she said. “I have a goal, and I’m very stubborn.” ■