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### A completely unique experience

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# sports

A COMPLETELY UNIQUE EXPERIENCE  
fultz/cm  
4-23-74  
sports local + Montana newspapers

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MISSOULA . . . . .

Joe Epler's path to becoming the top high hurdler at the University of Montana has to rank as a completely unique experience.

Do you know of any other track athlete who spends the off-season wrestling ornery steers on the rodeo circuit? Furthermore, this track athlete took up steer wrestling because bareback bronc riding was too much.

Back in the spring of 1969 Epler graduated from Helena High with a Class AA low hurdles title, a second place medal for the high hurdles, a one-fourth interest in Helena's state record in the mile relay, and a scholarship to the University of Montana.

But Epler did not compete in track at UM until the spring of 1972. "I just didn't feel like running track," Epler says.

Montana captured its first Big Sky track championship in 1972 and Epler contributed third-place points in the high hurdles and anchored UM's third place 440-yard relay team.

Epler seemed settled and was looking forward to two more years of eligibility when he lost a tango with a bareback bronc in July of 1972. "My wrist hung up in the rigging and when I finally pushed away I went under the horse," Epler explains. The result, explained the doctors, was six broken ribs and a punctured lung.

Two weeks of intensive care and two months of "just trying to live" followed.

Epler decided not to return to school and worked at a number of different jobs. "I drove truck, did some carpenter work, was a pipelayer and a number of other things," Epler recalls. "I wasn't going back to school, but I wasn't getting anywhere either."

"When I sold my stereo and had to start selling my guns just to pay the rent, I decided to get back to school," Epler said.

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So, Epler returned to school, but not before competing in the bull dogging event at 16 rodeos in Montana and Canada last summer.

This spring, Epler, a strong finisher, has run a number of 14.6 timings and Coach Harley Lewis believes the Grizzly senior could emerge as a Big Sky champion.

"He has been very consistent in meets and at practice," Lewis said. "One of these days, maybe when it warms up, he'll get a faster time."

Both coach and athlete wish Epler had another year of eligibility. "I regret what I did before because I took advantage of Coach Lewis and he has treated me just great," Epler said. "It looks like I'll be able to come back to school next year and help coach track too."

It is obvious Harley Lewis has welcomed Epler back to the track program because Joe Epler is also the team captain.

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