

# **Tiger Bar Sports: A World Class Training Center in the Making**

**By Jack Salisbury**

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The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is a place for convergence, an area where several rivers meet in its grassy, tranquil environment.

Within the greater Delta area rest many small island communities that are protected by levees. Among these fertile islands, Twitchell Island stands out as a place of convergence. Instead of bringing rivers together, though, it unites some of the best track and field athletes in the world.



Don Gosney Photo

**Suzy Powell, Co-Founding Athlete**

“After college you become a liability to the universities. It’s difficult to find a place to train,” said Suzy Powell, a 1996 and 2000 Olympian who broke the 21-year-old U.S. record for

Twitchell Island, located on the San Joaquin River, is home to the Tiger Bar Ranch, a 10-acre escape where athletes from all around train under the tutelage of Head Coach Dan Pfaff.

Created in the summer of 2006, Tiger Bar Sports, Inc., a non-profit USA Track & Field club, has a unique aim. Their training center provides a haven for world class athletes who don’t normally have access to top facilities and coaching.

“What we’re trying to do is become a place where athletes can come for answers—medical, sports psychology, just anything that crops up with athletes after college,” Pfaff explained. “After university, it’s really hard for athletes to get coaching, a place to work out, a weight room, medical treatment, and so forth.”

Track and field athletes are often left out to dry once their collegiate athletic careers are over, and funding for them is sparse. American athletes who have a shot at qualifying for the Olympic Games often need high quality facilities where they can train and fine-tune their skills.

the women's discus throw earlier this year. "If you're not at a university, facilities become a difficult issue for the athlete."

Courtesy [www.amyacuff.org](http://www.amyacuff.org)



**Amy Acuff, Co-Founding Athlete**

Powell, and her longtime friend, three-time U.S. Olympic high jumper Amy Acuff, are the founding athletes of Tiger Bar Sports. As roommates in college at UCLA, they thought about a training center such as Tiger Bar Ranch long before the project started. And, after graduation—Amy in 1997 and Suzy in 1999—they continued to compare notes and collaborate.

"Suzy told me that she had a sponsor who wanted to try to help find her a coach," Acuff said. "I knew first-hand what a rough road it had been for her, just trying to find a place to train, and then going it alone after college

"I had Suzy call my coach, Dan Pfaff, to see if he could recommend anyone that might

be up for the job of coaching Suzy. Tony [Rosenthal], our founder, realized that training partners would be a good thing and it wouldn't be efficient to have a coach for one athlete."

Any startup company—which Tiger Bar Sports essentially is—needs an initial stakeholder. Tony Rosenthal, the Chief Operating Officer of a homebuilding company, planted the first stake which laid ground for the project. Rothenthal knew Powell through their work ties, and he was willing to listen to her proposal.

Their discussions led to a pivotal donation by Rosenthal: ten acres of undeveloped land on Twitchell Island which became the Tiger Bar Ranch training facility. Since then, the program has not looked back.

"I'm not sure Tony knew that the scope of the project would expand so quickly, but he is a very altruistic man who likes to solve problems," Acuff said.

## A Unique Setting

Twitchell Island rests west of Interstate 5 in Sacramento County, near the junction of Contra Costa, San Joaquin, and Sacramento counties. The land is full of agriculture but sparse on people. Most of the 13,000-plus acres comprising Twitchell Island have yet to be developed, and the area seems light years removed from the densely populated Sacramento and San Francisco Bay areas. The nearest "major" town is Rio Vista (population 4,571 in the 2000 census). This

open landscape provides the rustic and secluded atmosphere that many of Tiger Bar's athletes enjoy.

"The Delta is rich in agriculture," said Acuff, who recently moved to nearby Isleton from San Diego. "I feel very nourished by the land itself. The produce is so fresh and amazing with the combination of rich soil and plentiful sun. Water surrounds everything and makes it very peaceful. The pace of life is slower, and people interact and know each other in the small towns, which I enjoy."

Pfaff cited the interesting dynamics provided by the surrounding wildlife.

"You've got coyotes running around, cattle, sheep, goats, hawks, and seals in the river," he said. "It's pretty easy to focus. There's not a lot of distractions. It's a place where you can focus and not be caught up. You can drive ten miles and not see three cars."

Aside from the secluded and focused atmosphere that Twitchell Island provides, a major perk for many Tiger Bar athletes is the reputation and experience of Pfaff.

Many athletes have relocated and moved from their former locales solely for the opportunity to train with the esteemed coach. Pfaff is well-known for his coaching accomplishments at colleges such as Louisiana State University, the University of Houston, the University of Texas, and the University of Florida.

"The hiring of Dan instantly convinced my husband and I to make the move up to Isleton," Acuff said.

Acuff is married to pole vaulter Tye Harvey, the 2001 World Indoor Championships silver medalist.

"I feel like he is the one to take me to the next level in my event, to help me refine my technique, and better tailor my training," Acuff continued. "I think he is one of the best coaches in the whole U.S. and definitely super versatile across events."

Said Powell: "Dan's presence has been very important and we would like to keep him forever. His coaching style and his talent as a coach have certainly made Tiger Bar Sports what it is so far. You have people rearranging their lives to be under Dan's tutelage. That says a lot about Dan as a coach and a person."

Pfaff has coached 33 Olympians, including five Olympic sprinters to run under 10 seconds in the 100 meters, and a variety of field event athletes. He freely provides his general philosophy about coaching, an outlook that he employs in his everyday work at Tiger Bar Ranch.

"I've been very fortunate through the years to coach numerous NCAA Champions, All-Americans, and Olympic medalists," Pfaff said. "Each athlete—whether they are a walk-on or a high school kid who barely made the team—has a unique set of abilities and a unique set of problems. I've always been a problem solver."

“Being a sports scientist, you look at things systematically and scientifically,” he continued. “That’s kind of how we operate here. People are honest and open. They have areas that need work and everybody helps that person towards filling that void. It’s a pleasure to coach [Tiger Bar Sports athletes]. Most of the people that come here are very pioneering. Most of these athletes have done all of this out of their own pockets.”

## Challenges for Excellence

At Tiger Bar Sports, it’s apparent that quality is valued over quantity. The center caters to less than 30 athletes, but each individual is an ambitious high achiever. With the Beijing Olympic Games less than a year away, they are maximizing their cards by gathering under Pfaff’s tutelage.

Besides Acuff (who placed fourth in the 2004 Olympics in the high jump), Powell (the 2007 USA discus champion and 6-time USA runnerup), and Harvey, Tiger Bar Sports features several more top-notch track and field athletes: Becky Holliday (pole vault), Anson Henry (100 meters), and Seun Augustus (long jump).

Although Tiger Bar Sports is picking up steam, the club/ facility faces challenges as it builds structure and name recognition. As a non-profit organization, they are constantly seeking donations from potential sponsors and benefactors.

“We have dealt with common challenges that many startup companies deal with, [especially] zoning issues,” said Powell, who is active in the company’s finances. “There’s been some growing pains along the way but we’re moving in the right direction. It’s such a big project, and you can’t expect it to run completely smoothly—that’s not possible. We’ve had problems, but those things have been alleviated.”

Added Acuff: “We are really hoping some individuals or businesses would like to help us get in a better position for next year so our athletes can focus on training. The towns of Isleton and Rio Vista have been wonderful in their support, but the population [here] is very small so we can only rely on them so much.”

Acuff explained that many Tiger Bars Sports athletes do the grunt work themselves.

“ We dug a hole for the long jump pit with shovels,” Acuff said. “We dragged around square pieces of rubber to use as runways because we don’t have enough [funding] to go around.”

Nevertheless, Acuff and the rest of the athletes at Tiger Bar Sports are very grateful for the opportunity they have.

“It’s infinitely better than the situations we had before because we can use the facility anytime we want and we have the best coach,” Acuff said.

And, as Pfaff explained, it is only natural for many people to make sacrifices for the betterment of an organization such as Tiger Bar Sports.

“A lot of people have made a lot of sacrifices to come here and train—with hopes that [the project] grows and takes off,” Pfaff said. “Everybody has quite a bit of commitment, hoping that this thing turns the corner.”

*For more information about Tiger Bar Sports, point your Web browser to  
[www.tigerbarsports.com](http://www.tigerbarsports.com).*

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