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Happy Fourth

Rockland teen a straight shooter

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ROCKLAND
When Sonya May started her freshman year at the University of Kentucky last fall, she had one goal – to make the NCAA All-American team for air rifle shooting. She accomplished that plus so much more.

On June 24, May won the USA Shooting Junior National Championships at Fort Benning, Georgia, earning a spot on the nation-

al team and a trip to Spain for the World Championships in September.

The World Championship is bigger than the Olympics for most in the shooting world. It also happens only every four years and brings 2,400 competitors in both junior and adult (or open) air rifle, pistol and shotgun categories.

Air rifle shooting involves shooting a small pellet using compressed air into a target 33 feet away. In the woman's competition, each

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USA SHOOTING PHOTO

■ Sonya May competes at the Air Rifle World Championship trials in Georgia.

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USA SHOOTING PHOTOS

■ Sonya May, far right, competes at the Air Rifle World Championship trials. She earned the right to compete in Spain in September.

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round involves 40 shots in 50 minutes and requires a steady hand and body, keen eyesight, and the ability to focus intently on the job at hand.

May, 19, didn't feel great going into the competition in Georgia. At the first qualifying match in Alaska, she hadn't shot well.

"Going into this match, I had a 26-point deficit between me and the World Championship Team score. I thought I wasn't going to make up the points and this match was just for fun. So I went into it with no pressure, which was good," she says.

When her assistant coach came in during the finals and asked if she had a passport, she knew she had done well enough to qualify for the World Championships.

"I was freaking out. I knew I would be going to Spain and I was so excited. I hugged my

coach and my teammates. I had a smile plastered on my face for 45 minutes," she says.

May, a 2013 graduate of Rockland High School, is the definition of a student-athlete.

Her first semester in college, she had a 4.0 GPA. She dropped down to a 3.8 her second semester and says it was due to her busy travel schedule that took her to New York, Ohio, Mississippi and West Virginia this spring.

The team, which has 24-hour access to the shooting range on campus for practice, sometimes even sleeps there the night before a travel day or match.

The Rockland native was also Rookie of the Year for the Great America Rifle Conference, which includes Army, Ole Miss and West Virginia, the reigning NCAA champions.

In her victory at the Junior Championships and her upcoming

World Championships, May will be competing for herself, not as a member of the UK team, but she says her main priority is bringing Kentucky a NCAA championship next year after this year's third-place finish.

The 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro is not completely out of the question, either. She hopes to do well at the World Junior Championships in her last qualifying year as a junior, but has also qualified as an adult for the U.S. team, so she can continue to compete at that level.

Sonya's parents, Todd and Chun May, travel to some of their daughter's competitions, bring food to her teammates and enjoy the moments where they can watch her shoot live.

"She'll call us, good or bad, after her performance is over," Todd May says. "We're there to support her. She has her coach and, as a kid gets older, you have

to let them do their own thing."

Her career in shooting has been a commitment that has forced May to leave some other interests behind. She is a black belt in Taekwondo, and says she misses how it kept her in shape.

"We do team workouts three days a week, cardio, strength and core training, which is stuff we need for shooting. The last couple of years my workout was bringing my hand to my mouth eating. I didn't gain 'the freshmen 15' but I gained 10 pounds of muscle mass," she says.

She said misses her friends and family in Rockland and can't wait for nights bringing Taco Bell to the beach with her friends when she finally gets a few days at home in August. Then it will be back down south to start her sophomore year as a media arts and studies major with a concentration in international studies at Kentucky.