

WSSU keeps 'pushing to the top' in women's track

BY CRAIG T. GREENLEE
FOR THE CHRONICLE

When it comes to women's cross-country and track and field, this past school year was arguably the most productive in recent memory at Winston-Salem State University.

At the national level, the Lady Rams had seven athletes to earn All-America honors (indoors and outdoors) in individual events and relays. At last month's NCAA Division II outdoor meet, WSSU posted a 12th-place team finish, the best ever in school history.

For the second year in a row, the Lady Rams placed second in the nation in the 4x100 relay. The foursome of Tajanel McNeill, Raven Covington, Nya-Michaux and Ty-Leah Hampton overcame problems with baton passes to run a personal-best time of 45.5 seconds.

Conference-wise, Coach Inez Turner's squad, comprised mostly of middle-distance track runners, finished one point short of sharing the CIAA cross-country title with Lincoln University (Pennsylvania).

This past winter, WSSU flexed its collective muscle by winning the CIAA indoor championships. The Lady Rams made a strong run at the league outdoor team trophy, but finished as runners-up behind Saint Augustine's.

Turner readily admits that she's pleased with all three facets of the program. But she makes it clear that she's far from being satisfied. "With all that's been accomplished, I feel happy, blessed and honored," she said. "But I also know that we have to keep working and keep pushing our way to the top. We're not there yet."

Even though WSSU loses nine seniors from this year, there's more than enough returning talent to assure that the program continues to grow. Five of the seven Lady Rams All-American just completed their sophomore seasons.

"The foundation has been laid," said Turner. "This program is going in the right direction. A lot of credit goes to our seniors. They left a footprint and provided a legacy for this program. Next year, we're looking to win all three CIAA championships and



Photos by Craig T. Greenlee
Raven Hamilton emerged as a prime contributor in the 800-meter run and 4x400 relay.

have a better showing at the indoor and outdoor nationals. We've developed a process here, and it works.

"The easy part is putting together the track workouts. The big challenge is establishing discipline, so that they push themselves every day in practice. They've started to

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— Inez Turner, Coach

realize that the end results have a lot to do with what they do on a daily basis. We continue to provide encouragement so that they truly understand what it takes to be a champion."

The Lady Rams got a big boost from two promising prospects this past season. Since both are underclassmen who figure to be around for a few seasons, Raven Hamilton, a sophomore, continued to improve as she gained more race experience at the 800-meter distance. Domtila Kiplagat, a freshman distance runner from Kenya, made an immediate impact after she joined the team in January.

Hamilton came to WSSU as a 200/400 sprinter from Greensboro Southern Guilford. Turner convinced Hamilton to move up to the 800 and the switch paid off handsomely.



It didn't take long for distance runner Domtila Kiplagat to establish herself as a formidable factor for the Lady Rams.

In her first year as a novice half-miler, Hamilton placed second at the CIAA indoor meet. Two months later, she beat the conference indoor champ (Domenique Julian-Williams of Johnson C. Smith) by .11 seconds to take the CIAA outdoor 800

title (2 minutes, 12.34 seconds). Hamilton also ran on the 4x400 relay that delivered a top-5 finish at the Division II outdoor nationals.

"Raven Hamilton pushed herself and she listened," said Turner. "Those are the main reasons why she ended up being an All-American. There's no question that greater things are in store for her."

Within one month after her arrival, Kiplagat proved herself as a budding star by winning the 3,000 meters at the indoor championships and anchoring the Lady Rams first-place distance-medley relay team. Kiplagat also qualified for indoor nationals in the 5,000 and finished 18th. During the spring, Kiplagat won the 1,500 and 3,000-meter races at the conference outdoor championships.

"Domtila came in and we threw her right into the fire," said Turner. "What she was able to accomplish in four months is unbelievable. I can't wait to see what she'll be able to do with a full season of training. She's a tough-minded athlete whose future is very bright."

Future

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says a lot about her skill set and what she's capable of doing in the future."

This spring, Sherman, who signed with UNC last November, fell short in her efforts to duplicate another state championship sprint double. Even so, there were two memorable sequences from 2015 that revealed much about Sherman's competitive persona.

At the state indoor meet in February, Sherman put on an impressive display in the 4x400 relay. Initially, Sherman led the pack on the second leg, but she seemed to be overcome by fatigue.

In the meantime, Leesville Road, Raleigh Wakefield and Cary took over as the frontrunners. Sherman, however, wasn't finished. With about 300 meters to go, she ran down three people to put the Mustangs back in front. One of the three runners was Layla White of Cary, the defending state outdoor champ at 400 meters. Parkland ended winning



Photo by Craig T. Greenlee
Parkland's Katlin Sherman (second from right) came on strong at the end to win the 100-meter dash at this year's Class 4-A state championships.

that relay in state record time.

In the finals of the 100 meters at the state outdoor championships, Sherman appeared destined to finish third. Tamara Clark of High Point Central and Sydnei Murphy of Apex, held the lead for most of the race. The out-

come changed drastically when Sherman bolted past the leaders over the final 10 meters to win in a photo finish with personal best time of 11.53 seconds.

"When those runners went past me in the 4x400 at the state indoor meet, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to go out like

that," Sherman recalled. "I left everything I had on the track. In the 100 finals, I kept telling myself, 'gotta win, gotta win.' As I got closer to the finish line, I put all my focus on picking up my knees and pumping my arms as hard as I could."

For now, Sherman is

taking a track sabbatical of sorts. She continues to train, but will not engage in any competition for the first time in three years. The vacation is welcomed and well deserved. Since early March, Sherman had been hampered to some degree due to an ongoing ankle injury, which pre-

vented her from being totally healthy.

"It's been a long time since I took any time off," said Sherman, who maintained a 3.7 grade-point average as a senior. "Physically, mentally and emotionally, I needed to get some rest. The reason I continue to train is so I won't get destroyed during workouts when I get to Chapel Hill. I know that college workouts are no joke and I want to be ready for that."

Sherman, who plans to major in exercise sport science, looks forward to the future with eager anticipation. There's no doubt in her mind that Chapel Hill is right place for her to be.

"My first reason for choosing UNC is academics," she said. "When I made my visit, I felt like I was accepted right away by the team, coaches and other staff members. Not only do I get to go to school in my home state, but I have a genuine opportunity to help create another dynasty like Parkland. I'm confident that Carolina will provide everything I need to help make that happen."

Sluggo

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That's a plus. When I lived on the other side of the country (West Coast), I'd eat fast food nearly every night."

This season got off to a wobbly start for Jacobs, who struggled at the plate with a .180 batting average in his first 16 games with the Dash. Since then, it's been a vastly different story. Jacobs has raised his average by 93 points and was hitting a team-high .273 at the start of this week.

The former Glenn star recently granted "SportsWeek" some interview time to discuss his career in pro baseball.

SW: Describe your journey as a pro athlete up to now.

Jacobs: It's been one, big growing experience. I learned a lot about myself and how to handle adversity. When things didn't go my way, I learned how to keep my head up. Aside from that, I learned how to make the most of the opportunities that come my way.

SW: Any advice for athletes who want to turn pro right out of high school?

Jacobs: A lot depends on the athlete and their situation. If he has the talent and the opportunity to go far, then I say go for it. Work as hard as you can and keep your eyes on the prize.

SW: What's one of the most important lessons that you've learned?

Jacobs: I'm glad that my dad [Eugene Jacobs] taught me how to fight — how to keep on going and not give up. That's very helpful in a game like baseball, where there's a lot of failure.

SW: How's that?

Jacobs: In baseball, the best of the best fail seven out of 10 times. So, there's a need to know how to deal with adversity. It takes strength and fortitude to keep moving forward. It all comes down to the belief you have in yourself. I thank God for every opportunity I've ever had.

SW: What's been your biggest challenge? Jacobs: The main thing in baseball is consistency. The guys who are the most consistent are the ones playing in the



Jacobs has committed no errors this season as the Dash's everyday first baseman.

big leagues. It's not necessarily the ones who are the most talented. It's the ones who go out and play, compete, put up good numbers and do something to help their teams win on a daily basis.

Throughout the years I've been playing — little by little — I've picked up bits of information that's been very helpful. Even when you're not at your very best, you figure out ways to still be productive. That's very important to remember because it's a long season. We play a 140-game schedule.

SW: What are some of those other ways to make an impact on the game?

Jacobs: You might not be able to hit a home run, but you can move a runner over, or hit a sacrifice, or score a run for your team. The guys in the big leagues always find ways to win ball games.

SW: Looking back over your base-

ball career, is there anything you would do differently?

Jacobs: Not really. But I have thought about that a few times. Of course, I'd like to have had more success earlier in my career. But in looking back, I can see that everything I've gone through has helped to make me who I am now. I'm pretty happy with myself as a person. I might not be content with my situation, but I'm never complacent.

SW: You had some exceptional seasons in the California League. This year, you're hitting for average, but your power numbers aren't quite the same (2 home runs, 21 RBIs at press time). What's been the difference?

Jacobs: There's no difference in the pitching from last year [California League] to this year [Carolina League]. As for my power numbers being different, that's just

baseball. You could be doing the exact same things at the plate with the exact same swing. But the numbers might not be the same every season. There are guys in the Majors who hit 40 home runs last year. But so far this season, they've only homered two or three times.

SW: So, how do you get back to playing at the level you were at a year ago?

Jacobs: You have to keep working, keep grinding. My swing doesn't feel as good as it has in the past. But that doesn't mean that things won't turn around real soon. I'm doing a lot of good work with our hitting coaches, trying to find a good routine.

When I was in spring training I hit balls everywhere — not over the fence — but a lot of hard line drives. Since I've been here, I've gotten a little off of what I was doing during spring training. With the time I'm putting in with my coaches, it will hopefully carry over to game situations like it should.

SW: You're closing in on a career milestone for home runs. Were you aware of that?

Jacobs: That was first brought to my attention after I hit my first home run here (April 29). Prior to that, I really hadn't given it any thought at all. Yeah, it would be cool for me to hit 11 more home runs this season and make it an even 100 for my career.

SW: What is it that you most want to accomplish this season?

Jacobs: When I think about it, it's not about the season, it's about the career. I just want to reach my full potential. It might not be this year. It might be next year, or the year after.

What it all boils down to is for me to keep working hard. My prime goal is to prove that I can play and compete at the highest level.

In spring training I played with Charlotte's Triple-A team [Knights]. I got the opportunity to play against a lot of players who are on the 40-man rosters of Major League teams. I played against them and did real well. That just sparked a fire and let me know that I really can do this.