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McLaughlin Recognized for His Coaching Style

by Alex Nye

"Swing those arms," a tall blonde figure instructs. He is helping a cross country runner during the sectional meet at Elma Meadows. "There is someone 20 yards behind you, but keep your eyes on that guy in front of you. Stay with him."

The blonde figure, dressed to run, turns out to be a coach. He waits for all the runners on his team to pass him before he speeds off to another location on the 3.1-mile course. There he will calmly motivate his team to try just a little harder.

Cross country is a thinking man's sport; there is much more involved than just running. It is a game of seconds, where one false move, one lurch, can cost you dearly at the end. Runners have to bear in mind the course, the weather, the competition-the minutiae of the sport, which is never the same twice.

Walt McLaughlin-the perennial blonde figure at all the elite races-knows exactly how to coach a team for success, in his own inimitable style.

The Past Remembered

"There is no doubt that he is motivational," said Dan Field, a former runner for McLaughlin who recently competed at the college nationals, running for Edinboro University.

"On top of making me a stronger, faster, better runner," continued Field, "he also put me in a position to be a leader. His coaching and motivation brushed off of him and influenced me to take a leadership role."

Field, who graduated four years ago, recalled McLaughlin's unique coaching methods.

"He was not a screamer during the races. It was more reinforcement than anything. We all knew the game plan going into the race. He always gave advice calmly and nonchalantly."

Nora Wynes, a 2005 graduate from East Aurora, remembered Coach McLaughlin much the same way.

"Coach never yelled when we were running during the race," Wynes explained. "You would see all these other coaches screaming at their runner, but Coach never raised his voice. That always made me want to run faster."

It was that easygoing attitude that seems to make the difference for most runners.

"That was his most successful method-that he didn't yell," Wynes said. "It is easy to ignore people who yell at you. You don't want to help out people who yell."

Current Success

Walt McLaughlin, for nearly seven years in a row, has been sending both his boys and girls teams to the elite races. The trend of success has earned him the Coach of the Year award every year since 2001.

However many awards and accolades McLaughlin has received, he will never give himself the credit.

"When I get these Coach of the Year awards, it really should be going to the team," McLaughlin said modestly. "I always tell the teams that they earned it, not me."

So far, in a season that has yet to end, McLaughlin and his teams have won two ECIC titles, two sectional titles, a state title for the girls, and runners up for the boys. Over the weekend, the girls team won third place overall at the Federation meet in Poughkeepsie and are likely to be invited to Portland, Ore., to run in the Nike Team Nationals in December.

East Aurora Athletic Director Fred Thornley reinforced the cross country program's staggering accomplishments.

"Walt McLaughlin is certainly leading the pack," Thornley acknowledged. "In a year when every team in East Aurora is winning sectional titles and doing super, he is doing one step better. And he has done so over time."

Like Field and Wynes, Thornley credits the coaching for much of the success.

"You have to have the right personnel, but you also have to have knowledge and be able to motivate. There is a science to it all. If you cannot rally the troops, you aren't going to win. McLaughlin is able to motivate runners; it is what I have seen over time."

Looking Toward the Future

Coach McLaughlin has a knack for persuading kids to come run. He has a history of taking in students who had been cut from teams, or who never thought of playing a sport.

This season, McLaughlin and his wife Martha had over 100 kids on their roster. Over 55 students came out to participate on the modified squad-an introductory level of running, which had very little turnout prior to the 2001 season. They grow larger every year.

Most athletes find out quickly after joining the squad that running does not have to be a punishment, and that pushing themselves on the field can have positive effects.

"Coach McLaughlin took my son, Sam, who had never run before, and made him a good runner in a short amount of time," Christopher Naughton said, who has watched his son develop into a competitive runner. "I am thrilled to death that Walt is Sam's coach. In two months, he has become a better runner and his grades have even improved!"

Naughton's wife, LauraLee, was also very complimentary.

"The kids really like McLaughlin," she added. "I think they perform for him. His team genuinely likes him. I know it's true for Sam. He is a great role model for these kids."

Scott Anderson, a returning junior at East Aurora, was the fastest runner for the boys team. Anderson placed third overall in the state meet, and was in the top 10 percent of all New York runners over the weekend in Poughkeepsie.

Anderson, like every past and present runner, said that part of the reason he runs hard during a meet and trains hard during the off season is because of his coach.

"Walt is one of the best coaches I have ever had," Anderson admitted. "He never yells at you for doing something. He is always motivating you. He never screams, just talks to you. He really makes you want to run."

According to Thornley, with the combination of knowledge and motivation, "the future looks very bright for the cross country program."

If one asks McLaughlin, however, he will try and deflect the compliments. As nice as the rewards are, he defines his role as coach as something much more than winning titles.

"I have always figured that to be successful in life, you have to find something you like to do," McLaughlin instructs. "I like to make kids better, and it is cool to see you making a difference. My wife and I know we have a positive impact. Coaching can be very rewarding that way."