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Finish Line

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FINISH LINE

BY CLEM BOYD





They've come from 32nd in their region to one of the top programs in the nation. It's been a journey through injuries and frustration. But this spring, the Yellow Jackets track & field team broke the finish line tape.

Olivia Esbenshade '17, Carsyn Koch '18, Lyndsey Smith '19, and Olivia Kundo '20 finished third in the distance medley relay (DMR) to earn All-America honors at this year's NCAA Division II Track & Field Indoor Championships. Their time of 11:19.55 wiped out their own school record by more than 10 seconds, and they registered the third-fastest performance in NCAA Division II indoor history.

Daniel Michalski '18, Josiah Bernard '18, Ethan Gatchell '19, and Wyatt Hartman '17 ran 9:53.72 in the men's DMR, second-fastest time in Cedarville's history, and earned All-America honors for their eighth-place finish.

In addition to the DMR, Koch competed in the 800-meter; Esbenshade and Michalski ran the mile. Koch, who ran the 800 at the Olympic Trials last year, repeated as NCAA champion, crossing in 2:05.65. Michalski earned his second All-America honor, finishing seventh in the nation at 4:09.45. Esbenshade ran 4:52.47, one of the top five-mile times in Cedarville women's indoor track history.

LONG ROAD

The program's turnaround is especially sweet for seniors like Esbenshade. "I've struggled with a lot of injuries and missed going to nationals by one place two years ago," she related. "None of the girls my freshman year had even broken 19 minutes in a 5K race, and now the whole varsity is running 17s."

"I never thought about making nationals as a freshman," Koch shared. "It wasn't in the realm of possibility. We've realized you don't have to be superhuman, but it does take hard work."

And the right atmosphere. "Coach Bo [Jeff Bolender '91] would never toot his own horn," she offered. "He's taken this team from where we were freshman year to now. This program is phenomenal."

“Each person brings an attitude of pushing one another,” Smith said. “You hear us cheering and screaming for each other till we lose our voices. Twelve of us went to nationals (four each on men’s and women’s DMR, plus four alternates), but the whole 110-member team helped us get there.”

TEAM VICTORY

Track and field is often referred to as a “team of individuals.” Not so with Cedarville.

“We encourage each other to work hard, eat well, and sleep right,” noted Koch. “We can’t run 400s with Lyndsey, but we can cheer her on.”

“It’s been really cool coming in as a freshman having Carsyn and Olivia help me,” offered Kundo, who ran the 1,200-meter leg of the DMR. “They’ve really pushed me. If I didn’t have them, I’m not sure I would do as well.”

“We’ve met athletes who don’t have supportive teams,” said Esbenshade. “That makes us really thankful. Our team supports us no matter what.”

“I’ve roomed with Tim and Ethan, and I live in the same unit with Ethan and Wyatt,” Michalski added. “It’s hard to get much closer, unless you run with your brothers. These guys are my brothers.”

DIFFERENT FINISH LINE

Because of their eternal perspective, Cedarville’s athletes, even during intense competition, keep their focus on the right kind of prize.

“We’ve met girls who’ve struggled with injuries and they’re nervous, and we’ve prayed with them,” Esbenshade said. “We pray for a good competition for them.”

“I’ve enjoyed a lot of conversations with competitors at meets, sharing life views,” Michalski said. “I’ve just tried to be one beggar pointing other beggars toward the Bread.”

“This is our platform,” added Smith. “God’s given us these talents not just to show people how fast we are. Maybe we were at nationals so we could talk with another girl and share how much we’ve appreciated the Christian atmosphere on our team.

“We don’t want to glorify self; we’re glorifying Christ.”

Clem Boyd is Managing Editor of Cedarville Magazine.



Passing the Baton

When 800-meter runner Carsyn Koch ’18 competed at the U.S. Olympic Trials last year in Eugene, Oregon, she had a running partner during the after-race cool down. Was it a coach? How about a former Yellow Jacket who traversed the same path.

Jane (Romig) Brooker ’86 was the first Yellow Jacket to participate in the Olympic Trials: Indianapolis, 1988 (800- and 1,500-meter); New Orleans, 1992 (800- and 1,500-meter); and Atlanta, 1996 (800-meter).

“With some people, you have an instant connection,” Brooker recalled. “That’s Carsyn and me. We just have this kindred spirit relationship, even though I’m a lot older than she is.”

Part of that stems from sharing a unique, high-level race experience, Brooker shared. But it also had to do with the Yellow Jackets. “Carsyn is such a genuine person,” said Brooker. “At the trials, God used her to serve another athlete. She was carrying the torch of being a Cedarville athlete.”



Brooker saw Koch again last fall at a homecoming dinner honoring legendary Cedarville cross country coach Elvin King ’64. “During my speech I handed a baton to Carsyn. I know that baton will be well taken care of.”