

## Jenks sisters among nation's elite

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Deb and Mike Jenks are raising their two daughters to pursue their passions, no matter what.

Turns out, what the Linn-Mar middle school sisters like to do best is run.

Run really, really far, in fact, and really fast, too.

Typical young girls in all other respects, 14-year-old Stephanie and 12-year-old Jennifer proved two weeks ago at a meet in South Dakota to be among the very best youth cross country competitors in the Midwest.

Before that, both claimed Class 4A state championships in cross country for their grade level.

And last August at the USA triathlon championships in San Diego, each of them claimed the national title for her age group.

“They’re fantastic athletes, both of them,” says Kyle Hoffman, a Linn-Mar track coach who handles cross country team duties for Oak Ridge and Excelsior Middle Schools. “They’re so natural at it that there’s not a whole lot I can do for them.

“And they’re both at the top of the list among the elite middle school runners in the whole country.”

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They also simply fell into the laps of the coaches in the Lions track program, since home for them is the family farm an hour away outside Oelwein in Buchanan county.

Both have open-enrolled at Linn-Mar schools for the past three years, but sports was only a small part of it.

"Mike and I have always tried to give the girls every opportunity in whatever they've chosen to do," says Deb, a Coe College graduate who worked as a certified public accountant before her daughters were born. "Both Steph and Jen have always been straight A students. But we didn't think they were getting the educational opportunities we wanted for them. So we started looking around at other districts."

They began to commute daily to Linn-Mar when Stephanie was in sixth grade at Oak Ridge and Jennifer a fifth grader at Westfield.

A year ago, the girls and their mom moved into a townhouse near the Linn-Mar campus where they live during the week through the school year. The farmstead near Aurora, according to Stephanie, is "home, sweet, home" and the place in Marion is "home away from home."

Living close to school, their folks feel, gives the girls time with friends and the chance to take part more activities.

"They're just kids," says Deb. "And kids still have to be kids."

The fact that they're also elite athletes at a tender age was not by design.

Their mom says they were encouraged (but not forced) to try anything that interested them from an early age, from reading to T-ball softball to soccer.

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Both fell in love with tae-kwon-do when little and earned brown belts.

Stephanie was the first to take up running when, on a whim, she decided to enter an age-group triathlon in the Quad Cities five years ago.

Although Deb held track records at Fort Madison High School and still runs for recreation, she says it wasn't her idea.

"I just thought it would be fun," her older daughter says. "I thought it would be a new thing to try."

Stephanie did surprisingly well in the grueling swim, bike and running event.

She was hooked, and her sister soon joined her.

They've been training and competing ever since, and for the past two summers have gone over the country during the summer to top-flight triathlon meets.

All along, Deb has been their coach. And last she year she became a nationally certified coach for the sport.

"The girls were going to a much higher level," she says. "And I thought I needed more information on how to help them train."

Deb is also organizing a local club (Mach II Multi Sports) to develop other youngsters interested in triathlon competition. So far, her daughters are the only members.

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But their success speaks for itself.

Two years ago, Stephanie finished eighth as a triathlete in the nationals and won the 13-15 division this past summer. Jennifer claimed the 11-12 division title in San Diego.

While both took state middle school cross country honors this fall, it was their performance in the Heartland Regional Cross Country Championships in Sioux Falls earlier this month that really raised eyebrows.

Competing unattached in the short-course competition, Jennifer easily won her division and finished second among all females. Against the top 221 mostly high school runners from six states, Stephanie came in second and qualified for the Nike national meet Dec. 3 in Portland, Ore.

As an eighth grader, she finished a full minute ahead of Linn-Mar senior Carolyn Newhouse, who had led her team to a second place in the state cross country meet.

"We didn't know how good she was going to be," Linn-Mar Head Coach Todd Goodell said afterward. "She proved it today."

To talk to the girls, however, you wouldn't know they excel somewhat out of the limelight on the national stage. They're as normal as can be.

"I'm the social one, with tons of friends," says Stephanie. "And I talk a lot.

"Jen, she's the shy one. But she's really, really smart. School comes easy for her."

Their parents are proud of both and not just because they win medals.

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“They’re just normal kids with a lot of different interests,” says Deb. “They want to do their best in everything, and we want to do everything we can to open doors for them.”