

Calloway's 'best group' ready for Drake

Written by Tom Fruehling
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After more than four decades of training high school runners, Jefferson girls track coach Bill Calloway knows he's no miracle worker.

Like height, you can't teach pure speed.

"I can't make a quarter horse into a thoroughbred," he says. "But I can help make a quarter horse run faster."

Year after year – and this one is no exception – Coach Calloway trots out a stable of sprinters that are almost always among the best in the state.

More than that, he has a knack for getting them to run faster together as a team.

While excelling also in individual events, Jefferson girls have historically specialized in the relay races. And with what Calloway calls

"the best group I've ever coached," they'll be on display the next three days at the prestigious Drake Relays in Des Moines.

Using eight different sprinters, the J-Hawks have captured three of the last four state championships in the 4x200 relay. The current Fast Four of

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seniors Lucy Schneekloth and Morgan Meese along with juniors Jasmine Blue and Abbie Ranschau are back to defend their state title in late May.

They also have the fastest time in the state this year in the 4x100 relay (48.38) and are top-ranked at Drake. In the 4x200 relay, the girls come in barely one-tenth of a second slower than state leader Waukeee. And they're only two-tenths of a second behind Boone in the 800 sprint medley.

"We really want a white flag at Drake, hopefully multiple white flags," says Schneekloth, the anchor of the group. "We've put in the work, and we're so lucky to have each other. This is our year to do it."

A title eluded them two years ago, even though she and Blue teamed with Maliya Ratliffe and Rachel "Bronco" Broghammer to set an all-time best record (1:40.94) in the 4x200 at the state meet later that season.

And a Drake championship would be particularly sweet for Schneekloth, whose mother Julie (Davis) was on Jefferson's winning 4x100 relay team back in Calloway's early years at the school in 1986.

"These girls are motivated," he says of the current quartet. "As far as work ethic and competitiveness, they're the best group I've ever coached. They have talent, of course, but they've made the most out of their ability."

And that's saying smoothing for someone who's worked with thousands of young people since starting out as an assistant boys coach at Cedar Rapids Washington in 1972 after earning a master's in education at the University of Northern Iowa.

He later served as the Warriors' head boys coach for four years, then moved to Jefferson as a girls assistant in 1984 and has been the head coach there for the past 29 years.

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Longtime Linn-Mar boys hurdle coach Tim Stamp was on Calloway's Washington track team in the mid 1970s.

"Coach Calloway," he says, "is the best sprint coach in Iowa as far as developing talent. He's a teacher, and his classroom is the track. And he teaches the right way. He's a great educator of young people.



"He's always positive. Never yells. But the kids just love him and respect him. Coach Calloway knows how to get them to perform at their very highest level."

In addition to being a natural motivator, Stamp says his former mentor and close colleague was in the forefront of weight training for runners clear back to his own prep days at Washington. Extensive work in the weight room (for both girls and boys) has been a staple of Calloway-coached teams ever since.

He says he came to be an early proponent through local track expert Tom Ecker, a onetime high school and college coach who ended up coaching Sweden's national team in the 1972 Olympics. Ecker's son Kerry was on the same Washington team as Stamp.

Calloway says Tom Ecker introduced him to the highly effective training methods of East Europeans he'd picked up firsthand.

"Back then, you mostly got things out of books," notes Calloway, fit and trim at 68 thanks to a regimen of biking up to 300 miles a week. "But Tom

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had all this background on stuff that most people had never heard of.

“I was lucky to be a little ahead of the times.”

Still, innovative track techniques and training only partly explain the success of his runners over these many years. His athletes say he instills in them a passion for hard work and a chemistry that puts team above individual achievement.

As has been the practice for years, for instance, team members helped raise more than \$1,000 to charter a bus and purchase meet tickets so that all 27 girls on the roster can attend Friday's Drake Relays competition.

“I want them all to experience Drake,” Calloway explains. “There's nothing else like it.”

This sense of camaraderie carries over onto the track as well. The girls say it's what makes them strong in the relays.

“It's what makes it work,” says Meese. “We push each other and we cheer for each other. That gives us confidence.”

Adds Ranschau, “To be good in relays, you have to be a good teammate. You don't want to let the others down. And we all trust each other.”

Although she qualified for Drake in the 100-meter dash, Blue opted out of racing in order to focus on the three relay events.

“I think it's more fulfilling to win as a team,” she says. “We practice so much together. It's more

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fun to celebrate together.”

For his part, Calloway hopes he’s done all he can to prepare his speedy young sprinters to do their very best, both this weekend and beyond.

“I tell the kids that if you work hard, you’ll be successful, no matter what you do,” he says.
“Every athlete is blessed with only so much potential.

“The ones I’ve coached who have worked the hardest to reach their potential are the ones I hold near and dear to my heart.”