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Nolan's Run For Glory

Sherman Native To Compete In NCAA Track & Field National This Week

John Sharpe couldn't help himself.

After all, it was his grandson's first road race and even though Nolan Swanson was barely in his teens he was running like a seasoned veteran.

The young man was clearly the class of his age group.

Seizing the opportunity as grandparents are known to do, Sharpe approached another man standing near-by and said proudly as Nolan ran by: "That's my grandson and he's going to the states someday."

Not missing a beat, Sharpe's newfound friend responded: "I hope so."

The "friend" was none other than Arden Downey, the Sherman Central School cross country coach, who, unbeknownst to Sharpe, had already been working with the precocious Swanson.

As predictions go, Sharpe was right on the mark, as his grandson went on to the cross country states four times during his high school career, ultimately winning the Class C-D title in 1993.

Unfortunately, Sharpe, who passed away when Nolan was in his early teens, never got a chance to see that happen.

"He would have been so proud," said Mary Swanson, Nolan's mom and Sharpe's daughter.

Imagine, then,, how Sharpe would have reacted had he been around to watch Nolan compete in the 3,000-meter steeplechase at the NCAA Division 1 Track & Field Championships this week at the University at Buffalo?

"He came from the small running-through-the-cemetery training program to running, probably, the next-to-biggest meet in the country," said Mel Swanson, Nolan's father.

Wake's Best

Nolan Swanson stepped to the podium, much like he does the starting line at a race, with confidence *and* with a few butterflies.

And who could blame him?

Of the hundreds of athletes, coaches, school administrators and boosters that filled a room at Wake Forest University last month, Swanson was the man of the hour the student who was to receive the “Arnold Palmer Award” as the university’s top male athlete.

But while athletic director Ron Wellman read off the Sherman native’s accomplishments as a cross country/distance runner during the 1997-98 school year, Swanson, his head bowed, let his mind wander for just a few seconds.

Back he went to when springtime at Sherman Central School wasn’t for running, but for pitching. Back he went to a time when he could throw on his baseball cap with the large “S” on it, march out to the mound and snap off a few good curveballs. Back he went to a time when he viewed his high school’s lack of a track as only a minor inconvenience.

Finally, Wellman completed his introduction and Swanson snapped out of his nostalgic mode. While he loves any sport, Swanson has become nearly addicted to running, which is why he was left standing at the podium in the first place.

He was the center of attention now, just as his maternal grandfather predicted he would be many years before.

Given the time to speak after receiving the award, Swanson thanked the equipment room people and the trainers for their help, but he saved his most eloquent thank-you for his coach, John Goodridge.

“My coach did a lot for me,” Swanson said. “He’s a helluva good coach. I did what he said and he’s turned me into this.”

Goodridge was touched.

“I’ve been coaching for over 20 years and it was one of the most special tributes an athlete could ever make. I don’t think there could be any coach who wouldn’t appreciate what he said.”

Ironically, Swanson, 22, was just hoping to be selected the top athlete on his outdoor track team.

That would have been enough.

It would have provided some measure of satisfaction for spending countless hours running countless miles in and around Winston-Salem, N.C., pushing, prodding and convincing his body and his mind that what Goodridge had been preaching for four years had been worth it..

Not that anyone who watched Swanson regularly needed convincing. After all, he was a cross country All-American last fall and had won two events – the 3,000 meter steeplechase and the 5,000 meters – at the Atlantic Coast Conference Outdoor championships in April.

But Swanson, the aw-shucks red-shirt senior with the easy smile and pleasant personality wasn't taking anything for granted. He had learned a hard lesson in 1996 when, after claiming the ACC cross-country championship, he used up too much energy early in the NAAs and finished 77th, well out of contention of All-American status.

A year and a half later, Swanson had learned patience the hard way. He also learned how to think about running and became convinced that he wanted to be more than just good. He wanted to be very good.

So when Goodridge called Swanson last month to inform him he'd won the "Palmer Award," Wake Forest's version of the Heisman Trophy, it was abundantly clear hard work had paid off.

The award, named after the legendary PGA golfer and Wake Forest alumnus, is given each year to the university's top male athlete. Last year, Tim Duncan, a friend of Swanson's who went on to earn NBA Rookie of the Year honors this season with the San Antonio Spurs, was the recipient. Past winners include Mugsy Bogues, Rodney Rogers and Randolph Childress.

Much to Goodridge's delight, Swanson's name was about to be added to that impressive list of honorees, making him the first cross country/track and field athlete in school history to receive the award.

"For Nolan to get that award is very special," Goodridge said. "The award is based on athletic merit and it paved the way for the future. He's sort of broken that barrier. People can reflect and say that it's OK to vote for a (track athlete)."

Just the thought of winning the award left Swanson shaken.

"It's hard to get credit (in track & field)," he said. "Not many people know you are there. But after the award was announced there was a whole new world of respect. The athletic director actually knows who I am now."

It's hard not to notice anything he does.

Back Home In Sherman

Sherman is a quiet village that features, among other things, a Ford dealership, a hardware store, a pharmacy and a pizzeria on Main Street.

One street over is Park where Sherman Central School stands, only a short drive from the Swansons' home on First Street.

With four athletic children – Nolan, Patrick, Lesley and Ryan – Mel and Mary have spent plenty of time watching them participate in sports of all sorts.

In fact, the Swansons had an idea that Nolan would excel in sports after a conference with Deb Palmer, who was Nolan's kindergarten teacher during his one year at Panama Central School.

“Debbie once said, “This kid is going to be a whale of an athlete,” Mary recalled.

How prophetic.

During his career at Sherman, Nolan won the 1993 state cross country championship, was chosen to the all-state team and was a second-team all-Northeast choice. On the basketball court, he earned all state mention and was a McDonald's All-American nominee.

And each time he competed, winning was all that mattered.

“Once he was preparing for a race in Jamestown at the college,” Mary recalled. “The next day Arden (Downey) was giving him some strategy. Nolan said, “I guess I'll just go kick butt.”

He's been doing that since he was in seventh grade.

“He just had everything,” Downey recalled. “He was very athletic, and he had the stamina, the work ethic and the desire.”

By the time his senior year rolled around, Nolan was regularly receiving calls from college coaches, hoping to recruit him for their track and cross country programs.

“When he went to (the Junior Olympic) nationals and won (the steeplechase) the summer before his senior year it was getting to be pretty obvious that if he was going to go Division 1 in any sport that track was going to be it,” Mel said.

Nolan paid a visit to Georgetown. Edinboro, a Division 2 school, was also hot on his trail. But after making a phone call to Goodridge in February Nolan arranged to visit Wake Forest. It was the right fit.

“He went down and he loved it,” Mel said. “It was a small enough atmosphere and a big enough league. The coach talked a lot about the places they go. Nolan realized running was big and the ACC was a quality cross country situation. He decided right then that that’s what he wanted to do.”

Goodridge admitted that Swanson didn’t have the “classic background” when he arrived in Winston-Salem in the fall of 1994, but he quickly learned that he was up to the task.

“We’ve been thrilled he selected Wake and obviously thrilled that he has developed the way he has,” Goodridge said. “Each year he seems to be getting better and better. It’s turned out to be a very exciting story.”

“Swoons” Lights It Up

Swanson, affectionately known as “Swoons” by his friends, was on fire during an intramural basketball game last February.

Everything he threw toward the hoop found the bottom of the net.

It was bad enough for his opponent that Swanson ran up and down the court effortlessly the entire game without even breathing hard, but it was even worse when he got a peek at the rim from beyond the 3-point line.

Hence the name “Swoons.”

It seems Nolan was given the nickname by his friends several years ago after they combined his last name with the sound the ball makes – “swish” – when it hits the nylon, something that happens with remarkable regularity when he fires from downtown.

During one tournament game, Swanson connected for 13 3-pointers, his team won and the legend of Nolan grew even more.

“I was on fire,” he says. “I hadn’t played that much and I don’t practice, but all of a sudden I was throwing in threes like it was my job.”

Imagine for a moment what he would have done if he hadn’t been flat-out exhausted from running 15 miles that day and 105 miles that week in training for the Demon Deacons’ track team.

Then, again, when you crave to be an All-American distance runner and when your sights are set on the NCAA Championships, there are no limitations.

Just rewards.

Hoping For All-American

Goodridge admits that Swanson's story is unique.

"It's a highly, highly unusual story," he said.

But when the gun goes off to start the steeplechase trials at 7:20 p.m. Wednesday at UB Stadium, Swanson will be there battling for a spot in the finals, which are scheduled for 7:50 p.m., Friday.

Swanson, who qualified for both the steeplechase and the 10,000 meters, decided to run only the former this week with an eye on a top-eight finish and the All-American status that goes with it.

"A lot of people think I have a major chance of winning this," said Swanson, whose personal-best time of 8:41.72 was set in Oregon earlier this spring. "I don't want to disappoint anybody, but I'm probably not predicted to finish in the top three. Maybe the top six or seven."

His chief competitors figure to be Matt Kerr of Arkansas, John Mortimer of Michigan, Todd Davis and Bryan Bothwell of Portland and Migel Galeana of Montana State.

"Winning it would be a miracle," Swanson said. "I'm not really a favorite. I'd be happy just to be All-American. I'll try and run with the leaders as long as I can...I hope to get down to 8:35."

Noted Goodridge, "I think he has the ability to be very competitive in the event whoever shows up in the field."

Added Mel Swanson: "He's within seconds (of the leaders). He said you never know how a big race like nationals will go because everybody will kind of use strategy rather than top speed."

Strategy aside, one thing is certain: "Swanson is in peak condition.

"I'm in the best shape of my life and I'll bring it to Buffalo and do what I can with it," he said. "It's going to be a blast just trying to hang on with those guys. I can't wait to get up there."

When he races, friends and family, totaling more than 50, will be in attendance to cheer him on.

"I think he'll do well." Mary Swanson predicted. "He always surprises me."

To those who have followed Nolan's career that should come as no surprise at all.

Looking To The Future

Upon completion of the NCAAs, Swanson will return to Wake Forest to continue training in preparation for the USA National Championships, beginning June 22 in New Orleans.

“I’ll get the experience of running with Olympians,” Swanson said. “They’ll drag me into a fast time. When you’re in a race with fast guys you can’t help but run fast.”

The rest of his summer will include continued training as he looks toward the indoor and outdoor track seasons in 1999.

Academically, he’s scheduled to graduate next May upon completion of 20 credit hours.

As for his thoughts about one day becoming an Olympian, Swanson admitted it “would be a tough thing to do.”

“To make the Olympics, you have to be the top three Americans pro or college, in that year,” he said. “You have to have everything go right unless you’re a machine. But I’m going to keep running a couple years after school to see if I get any faster. If I keep getting better, I’ll continue training and see if I can make. I’m still improving.”

Big Man On Campus

With his running success, Swanson has become somewhat of a celebrity at Wake Forest. Even Dave Odom, the Demon Deacon’s basketball coach, greeted Swanson after the all-sports banquet.

Throw in the fact that he’s developed a friendship with Duncan over the years and Swanson finds himself in some pretty select company.

“When he stayed here his senior year, he didn’t act all high and mighty,” Swanson said of Duncan’s apartment last year.

‘He had a signed jersey of Michael Jordan about his fireplace, Swanson said, “I’d just like one of Tim’s jerseys.”

Here’s an idea. Maybe Swanson could swing a deal: a Duncan San Antonio jersey for one of his signed track jerseys. At the rate Nolan’s going, that trade could turn out to be a good one for both of them.