

track

Women's distance running becoming a dynasty under trio

By KEVIN HACKETT
Of the Emerald

The track tradition in Eugene and at the University has long been centered on distance running. While the men's programs have been powers in track and cross country, the women's teams have slowly been following suit.

This year, women's track coach Tom Heinonen has begun to see his teams dominate in the distances and his strength is centered around three freshmen athletes who walked-on in order to run for Oregon — Molly Morton, Heather Tolford and Debbie Richie.

They have taken turns shattering the Oregon school distance records this year. Many times it hasn't been a matter of whether the record would be broken, but rather who would break it. Tolford currently holds the 5,000 and 10,000 records and shared the record in the 3,000 with sophomore Katy Mountain. But all that could change when the Ducks run against Oregon State this Saturday at Hayward Field.

The development of the women distance runners brings a special joy to Heinonen. Heinonen himself was an All-American in the six-mile while attending the University of Minnesota and in 1969 won the national AAU marathon. He lets his assistants — Scott Irving and Mark Stream — do most of the coaching of the throwers and the sprinters, but the distance runners are his special project.

"We already have a distance running tradition," the second year Oregon coach said. "People think of us as the distance power in the Northwest and they're beginning to think of us as a power nationally."

Heinonen has seen his young distance stars wander to Oregon from all points. Tolford is from Woodland Hills, Calif.; Richie from Concord, Mass. and Morton came down I-5 from Portland's Lincoln High.

All three made Heinonen's var-

sity cross country team last fall. Tolford placed 31st and Richie 47th in the AIAW national meet to lead the Ducks to a seventh place finish.

Tolford, who cuts a frail figure on the track at 5-1½ and 97 lbs. is probably the most powerful runner in Heinonen's stable. For Heinonen, it's been a matter of finding an event long enough to exploit Tolford's talents.

"The longer the distance, the better," Heinonen says. "Heather thrives on high mileage."

Since Tolford came to Oregon after competing for the San Fernando Valley Track Club for a year and attending Cal State-Northridge, Heinonen says most of his work has been devoted to getting Tolford to pace herself.

"She just likes to get out and run," Heinonen laughs.

While most of the meets she has competed in this year have the 3,000 meter or an occasional 5,000 meter runs as their longest distance event, it hasn't presented any problems for Tolford. She has qualified for the nationals in both those events. Heinonen wishes the 10,000 meters was included in the national meet — possibly even the marathon.

"At the longer distances Heather can be a world-class competitor," Heinonen observes. Tolford has already proven her status as national class by finishing 14th in the 1976 national AAU cross country championships and 13th in the national AAU 10,000 a year later.

Richie came to Oregon on an academic scholarship. Heinonen would give her an 'A' for her performance on the track.

"Debbie has done some astounding things this year," Heinonen says of the 19-year-old. "She continues to amaze me."

Like Tolford, Richie is probably best suited for the longer distances. And like Tolford, she has qualified for the nationals in both the 3,000 and 5,000. Heinonen sees different styles in the two.

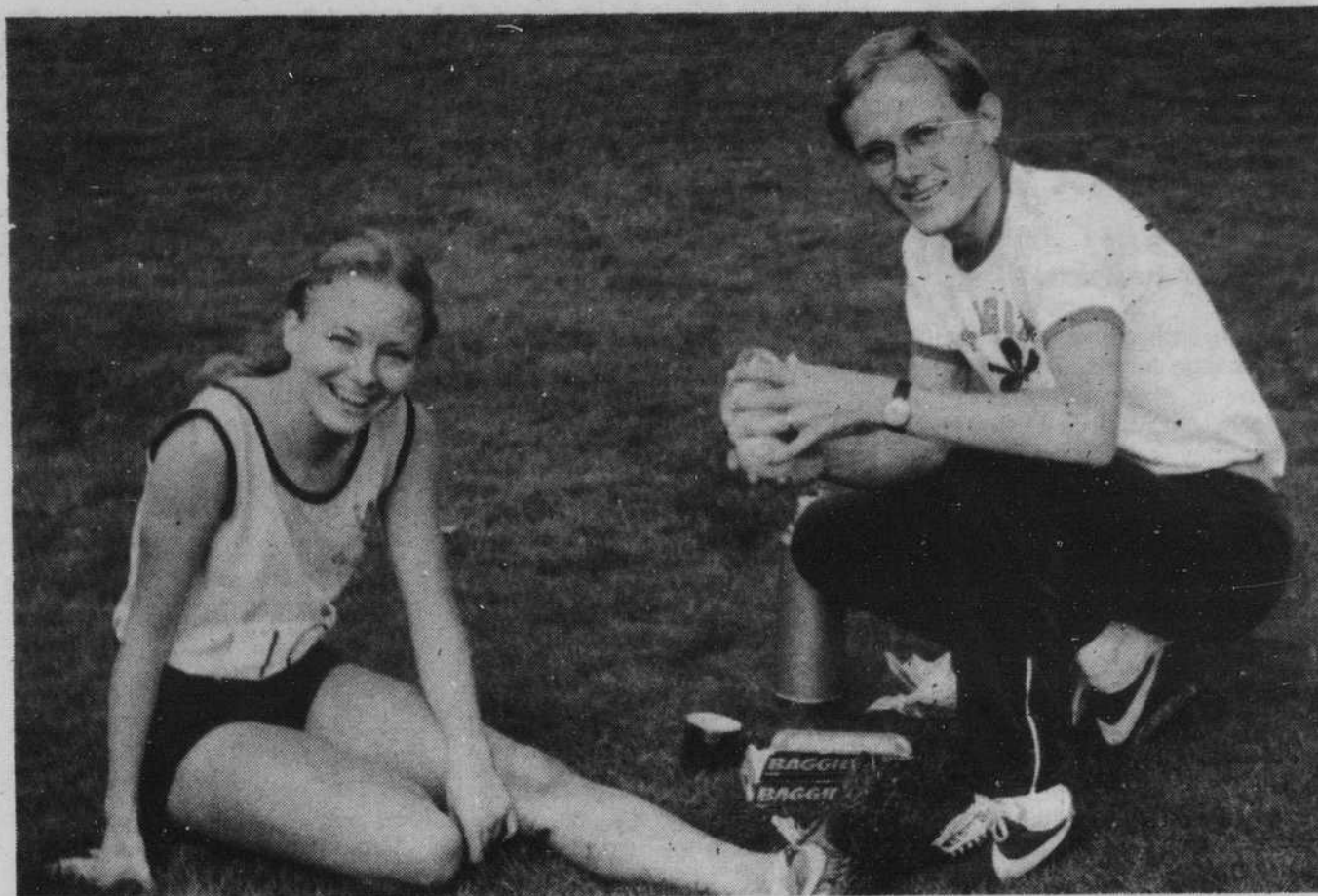


Photo by Eryn Forbes

Oregon coach Tom Heinonen, applying ice to Heather Tolford's injured leg, has been the key behind Oregon's women's domination of the distance events in the Northwest. Heinonen was an All-American while at Minnesota.

"Heather can just get out and go on forever. Debbie is a more tenacious runner. She can really hang on to somebody in a race."

Morton came to Oregon after placing second in the two-mile and seventh in the mile in the state high school meet last year. Probably the only thing separating her from Tolford and Richie is the amount of experience.

"She's really a novice," Heinonen says. "This is the first year that she has trained year round."

Because of her inexperience, Heinonen is unsure what event will prove to be Morton's best.

As Heinonen's runners gain more experience during the com-

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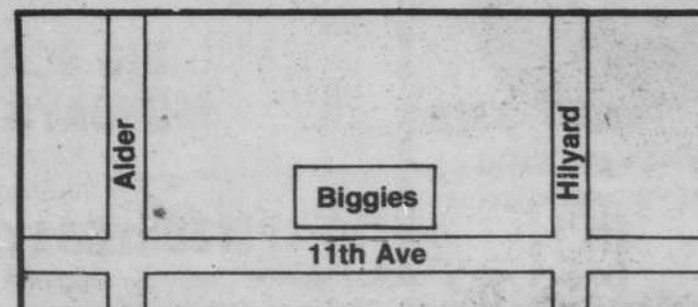
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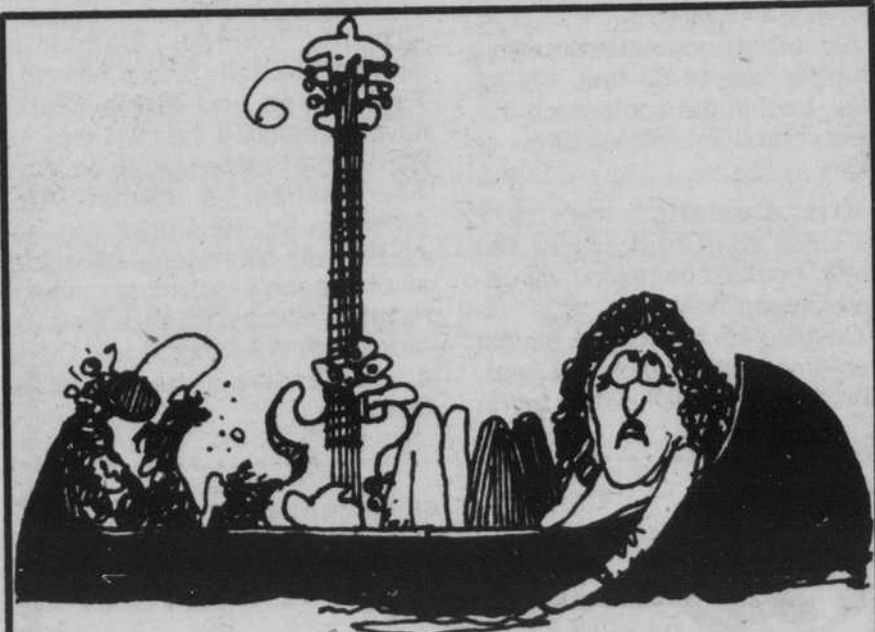
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