

# Base of bedrock

## The Ducks are a contender, courtesy of Tom Heinonen

Like a pearl buried in a coral reef, Oregon's women's cross country program has winked its success at the world for seven years amid the jagged edges and octopus-like tentacles of its rivals on the collegiate cross country scene.

The two most recent rivals have been Stanford and Virginia, both virtual unknowns in cross country until the advent of the 1980s.

Like a pair of octopuses, the two schools have each seized hold of their respective coasts, snaring virtually all of the top running talent in their respective area.

And even though both schools signed to scholarships the majority of the best runners on their respective coasts this year, Oregon coach Tom Heinonen isn't really worried.

He is happy with who he recruited, and feels secure in the knowledge that the Virginias and Stanfords of the world may dull, but never cover, Oregon's glint.

So how has this slight, bespectacled man who seems more suited to be a philosophy professor produced a record like he has at Oregon, using what appear on the surface to be very insufficient materials.

In part, it has been done through the assiduous cultivation of Oregon prep talent, whether it be from sprawling suburban Portland high schools or tiny Eastern Oregon high schools.

In part, by singling out prep runners with the talent to grow, to get better, to improve.

And partly by fitting the women he recruits into a structured program that is almost unstructured because of the amount of independence allowed.

"We're a different kind of a school," says Heinonen. "We're a little bit more laissez faire than other programs in our approach."

"I don't dominate, and I don't

intimidate, because I know we can win without doing that," he emphasizes.

The record book outlining Heinonen's eight-year career at Oregon indicates the truth to his statement. The Ducks dominated the Pacific Northwest, winning seven consecutive regional titles and finishing in the top seven at the national meet every year — and in the top five all of the last five years.

And the foundation of this success? Mainly, Oregonians.

Until this last spring, Heinonen had signed every prep AAA state cross country champion produced in Oregon. This year, he didn't offer the state winner a scholarship because he didn't feel her talent was worth matching the full-ride offer Oregon State made.

Five of last year's top seven runners were Oregonians, and a sixth was recruited from an Oregon junior college.

"There are only two areas where Oregon high school marks stand up well year in and year out when compared nationally," Heinonen says. "The javelin and distance running."

"Why distance running?" Heinonen repeats. Partly because of tradition, the notion of Oregon — and more specifically Eugene — as being a running mecca. Also, because of the lack of extremes in temperature, like heat or humidity or snow.

But it's the difference between the age-group and high school programs in Oregon and other parts of the country that allows Heinonen to take these rough stones and turn them into diamonds, he says.

Unlike California and the East Coast — which feed Stanford and Virginia — Oregon has no age-group track program that dominates the state's aspiring



Photo by Dave Johnson

Women's cross country coach Tom Heinonen has built one of the top women's collegiate distance programs in the nation.

distance runners.

That leaves Oregon runners doing low mileage amounts in high school and rarely competing in high-profile races.

"That's good, because they

haven't been drawn out to their limits" by the time they reach college, says Heinonen.

"I look for people with backgrounds like all the Oregonians we've recruited," he says.

"I look for people who will get better because they haven't done incredible amounts of work in high school," he says.

"They will improve simply by being older and wiser, but they will also improve because they can do more work than they've done before."

But his runner's improvement doesn't come at the point of a bayonet.

"I don't try to mold them," Heinonen says. "I don't see them every day, I don't tell them how many miles to run in the morning."

"I want my people to be individuals," he says.

Heinonen points to distance sensations Leann Warren and Eryn Forbes as examples of the flowering of this principle. The pair were "inseparable" their first year in Eugene as freshmen at the University, Heinonen recalls.

"They were like two kids in a candy shop, and they enjoyed it together," he remembers. "But

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