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Photo by Michael Clapp

Oregon track coach Tom Heinonen builds a...

By STEVE TURCOTTE

FOR YEARS, THE OREGON women's track and field program lived under the long shadow of the wildly successful Duck men's team and its mentor, Bill Bowerman.

But ever since head women's coach Tom Heinonen arrived on the scene, things have changed — and they have all been for the better.

Instead of playing the proverbial second fiddle to the men, Heinonen's women are marching to the beat of their own drum.

And for Heinonen, success has bred success.

Since taking the reins almost eight years ago, Heinonen has guided the women's track program out of the shadows of the men's program and thrust it into the national spotlight. In Heinonen's first year, the Ducks were 24th at nationals. Last year, his team was fifth.

"We have grown with the times," says Heinonen. "We have built on the tradition of Oregon men's track and have gone from there."

When Heinonen first arrived at

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Oregon, he was a graduate assistant coach receiving little pay for his long hours. In 1977, the women's track and cross country programs received a shot in the arm when Heinonen was named as a full-time coach. It allowed him to spend more time concentrating on what he does best — coaching.

"That was a giant breakthrough, just being paid full-time," admits Heinonen. "Being paid \$14,000 a year — that was top of the line stuff. Being a full-time coach gave me time to contact people and make some phone calls and assemble a team."

When Heinonen took over the program, he was assuming command of a track program that had not only been consistently trounced at the regional level, but had also done little or nothing on the national level.

He quickly changed all that. "The team was just a glorified PE program in those days," Heinonen says. "They were not

able to offer any scholarships and had little information on people in state as well as out of state."

Heinonen was able to offer some scholarship money his first season, although it was nothing outstanding. The money was soon to become more significant in the following years.

"The first year we had any money we recruited Melanie Batiste and Debbie Adams (two sprinters)," says Heinonen. "The following year we had more money and we got the best recruiting class in the country in our first real attempt at recruiting."

In becoming a national track and field giant, Heinonen points out that recruiting is first and foremost on a coach's list of priorities. "If you can't recruit the top quality athletes out of high school, you can't put together a top-flight college team."

Recruiting is one area where Heinonen has had little

difficulty. Sure, he has lost a few prize athletes he would have liked to have seen in an Oregon uniform, but more times than not, he has landed quality high school athletes time and again.

In some cases, recruiting can be an easy process. Like in the case of freshman Janell Thorland, it didn't take much convincing for her to come to Eugene.

"Ever since I was little I always had a goal to come to school here," Thorland says. "We used to come here for all-comers meets and I would love the track."

But in other cases, Heinonen has had to do a good selling job. And it's an easy thing to do when he has a top-ranked program to back him up. It's hard for high school athletes to not notice that the Ducks have been one of the nation's top-ranked dual meet teams for six years and a perennial contender in the NCAA championships.

"The reputation for track and field was excellent and I liked that," says Cam Talton, a freshman sprinter who was

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