

Sports

Now it's Graves who carries Oregon's distance torch

By Dennis Fernandes
Of the Emerald

"You've come a long way, baby."

Those were probably the sentiments expressed Saturday at the Pacific 10 Conference championships, when Oregon junior distance runner Penny Graves cut across the tape in the 1,500-meter finals for an individual championship and personal best of 4:18.57.

Not 24 hours earlier, Graves had to settle for third place in the 3,000-meter final, succumbing to UCLA's Polly Plumer and teammate Annette Hand for her first setback of the entire season. Overcoming that disappointment is just another episode to the melodrama of an athlete who just seems to get tougher when the going gets rough.

She is slowly carving herself a name with the likes of Oregon track immortals Kathy Hayes, Leann Warren and Claudette Groenendaal. At the Oregon Twilight over a week ago, Graves added the 1,500-meter race to the resume she will take to Baton Rouge, La., for the NCAA championships in a few weeks. She has already qualified for the 3,000 and 5,000 meters, and with Hand close at her heels, Graves still owns the Pac-10's best times in all three events.

Not bad, for a former frustrated 800-meter runner who made a switch to cross country for endurance purposes

in the fall of 1985. That adjustment worked out pretty smoothly too — Graves captured the Pac-10 cross country championships last fall and didn't lose a race until the NCAA championship, finishing a respectable 13th.

"It's been a tribute to Penny's versatility, that she's gone from an 800-meter runner in high school to where she is now," said Oregon coach Tom Heinonen.

A three-time Class AA state champion at that event in Port Angeles, Wash., the freshman Graves came to Oregon with her expectations set perhaps a little too high. Her best 800-meter time was 2:12.61, not even good enough to cover her personal record in high school. Impatient and searching for answers, Graves even tried her hand at the javelin and ran the 1,500 meters twice.

"I wasn't patient enough, and I was beginning to get self doubts," Graves recalled. "Physically, I didn't even feel good running it."

"I was beginning to wonder if track at the college level was too fast for me."

Graves had so many other athletic pursuits — she had played soccer, basketball and softball in high school and participates in badminton at the national level — that she could have feasibly taken up another sport. But Heinonen gave her a cross country program to follow for the summer, and the rest is

history.

"It (the program) was to improve her training and get her fitter," he recalled. "She had more endurance than the sprinters and jumpers anyway, and I thought it help her in the 800 and 1,500."

"I thought it would be good for her training for the 1986 track season, and Penny ended up being our number-two (cross country) runner."

Graves' inaugural cross country campaign was cut short at the NCAA meet by the flu bug, but not before she had amassed fifth place in the conference meet and sixth at the district competition.

For track, in what Heinonen terms "a year of mixed results," the 1986 season promised potential if nothing else. The sophomore Graves ran a 9:27.81 in her very first 3,000 meters, but didn't improve. She ended up the year with third-place ribbons at the NorPac Championships in the 1,500 and 3,000 meters.

With one year of eligibility remaining, Graves is probably the forefront of the Pac-10's middle distance corps. Her only 5,000-meter competition ever was at the Oregon Invitational earlier this month, and she blew away the NCAA standard of 16:20.24 by almost 17 seconds.

"I just go out and run," she said, "and whatever happens, happens."

If that's the case, then this baby's still got a ways to go.

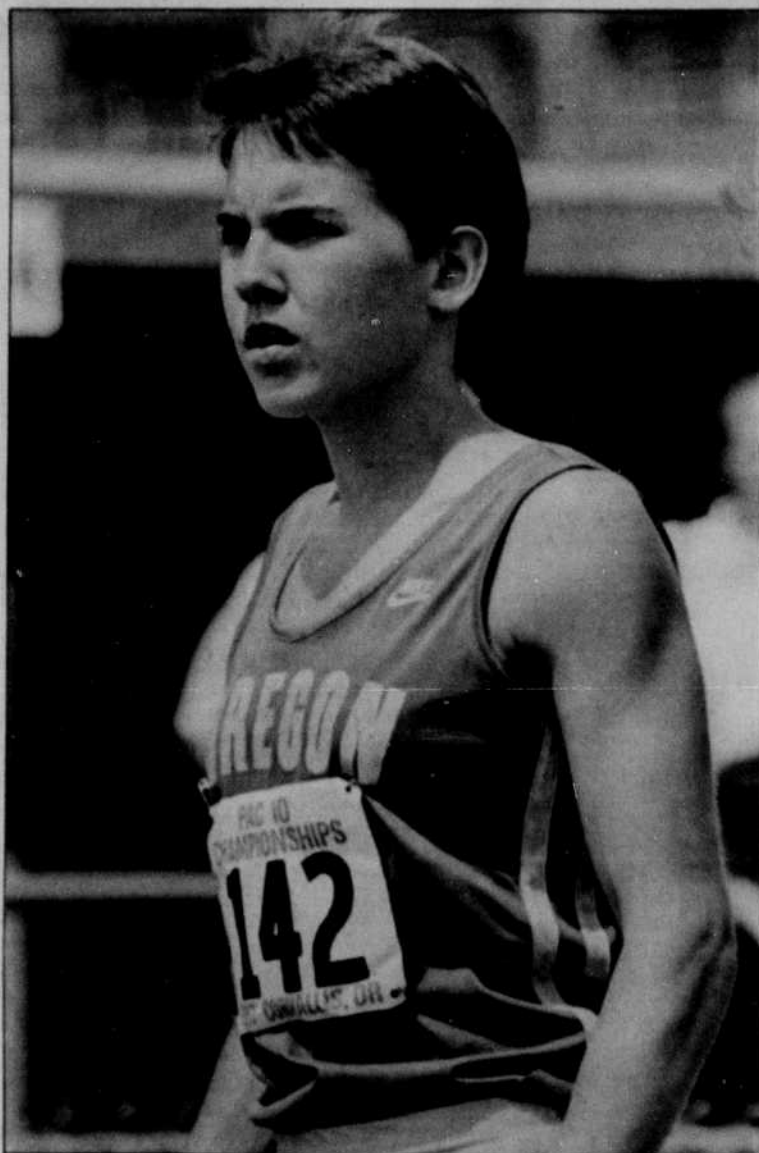


Photo by John Giustina
Oregon junior Penny Graves has emerged as one of the Pac-10's top distance runners in less than two years.

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come and Hand was able to keep up the final-lap pace. When Harron nearly stopped at the bell lap, thinking the race was over, Hand sailed past her and finished more than 12 seconds ahead, driven by her own well-timed kick.

Another bright spot in Friday action was Oregon's Lisa Johnson, who came a respectable second in the 10,000 and bettered her personal time to

35:07.

Also Friday, Camille Jampolsky jumped 5-10 for third place in the high jump.

Yvette Brown's 48-0½ shot

put was good enough for sixth place and she earned fifth in the discus with a 167-10 throw. Jill Smith took fifth in the javelin with 164-4.

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