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End of an era: Liberty track star shares lessons learned

April 29, 2008 | Eric Brown

Everyone enjoys classic rivalries. For distance running fans, the 2007 NCAA Division I Cross Country Championships produced a battle of Apollo versus Rocky-like proportions. On one side stood the University of Oregon's Galen Rupp, a distance running machine who trained on state-of-the-art exercise equipment and slept in \$10,000 high-altitude tents.

His counterpart grew up home-schooled, trained for years by himself and did not hail from a university known for producing the nation's best runners.

Yet on Nov. 19, 2007, in Terre Haute, Ind., Liberty University's Josh McDougal became the second national champion in school history.

Those who hear of McDougal's accomplishments may view his life as some sort of fairy tale, but no one disagrees with this perception more than the senior himself.

"It's really not," said McDougal. "It's all about hard work and dedication, and there were no shortcuts to any of that."

It is easy for someone to think of McDougal as a superstar. After all, the 14-time All-American achieved much over the span of four years in collegiate cross country. Along with a national championship, he accumulated four conference titles, three NCAA Southeast Regional championships and numerous other distance running accolades and honors. Through all of this success, McDougal said he has discovered there is more to life than trophies and championships.

"The national title is too small to define anyone," said McDougal. "It does not define me. It's not changed me in the least."

Recently McDougal received the NCAA Cross Country Male Athlete of the Year Award in the mail. Rather than place it in his own personal trophy case, he asked his coach, Brant Tolsma, "Do you want this or should I throw it away?"

Normally, an athlete of McDougal's caliber treasures such an award, but over the years he has learned to accept honors with a humble heart.

"He doesn't spend a whole lot of time basking in what he's done, because he's more focused about what he wants to do in the future," said Tolsma. "That's hard for a young person to do, but I think he does a real good job of that."

The future of Liberty's humble harrier is indeed quite intriguing. When he graduates, McDougal hopes to sign a contract with a shoe company and compete at the professional level. During that time, he will also try out for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China.

Although he runs each race with great intensity, McDougal's personality when he is not competing is much more laid back. Often times, when approached by others who do not know him, his shyness can be mistaken as being prideful or unsociable.

"I think people get the wrong impression just watching 'Around Liberty in 90 Seconds' or reading the Web page, thinking that everything is so easy and that I'm so successful," explained McDougal. "In many ways in their eyes I must be, but in mine it's always a struggle and I'm hardly ever where I want to be in my faith and in my running."

Those who follow McDougal's collegiate career on a regular basis understand that his relationship with God greatly outweighs his passion for running. In fact, those who criticize him on various blogs and Web sites are often attacking his faith rather than his abilities.

"It's kind of amazing how many people will blast him, but most of the time when people are blasting him it's because he represents Jesus Christ," said Tolsma. "He gets some persecution for Christ, but that is an honor."

This year will mark the end of what Tolsma refers to as the "Josh McDougal Era" at Liberty, but few will forget McDougal's accomplishments at LU.

"I think people will always remember me as the guy who won nationals and was a really good runner, and I can't help that," said McDougal. "I would like them to have a more realistic view of things."

While the imprint McDougal will leave on Liberty won't be seen until he graduates, one reality is clear today: his rise to fame is not a fairy tale, but it definitely features a happy ending.