

Michelle Zikes wows J-Hawk coaches

Written by Tom Fruehling

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In more than three decades of coaching high school track, Jefferson's Bill Calloway can count in the thousands the number of girls he's tutored.

So it's no small accolade for him to say of current J-Hawk junior distance runner Michelle Zikes, "I've never seen anyone make a greater turnaround from one year to the next.

"It's really unbelievable. And the fact is, she pretty much did it all on her own. It's the most remarkable story ever in all my years of coaching."

As a nondescript sophomore last year on the junior varsity, Zikes could barely make it around the track twice. Now she's winning races in the grueling 3,000-meters. Almost every time she runs she beats the mark she had before.

"She may not win a state championship," says Calloway. "But who knows. I've never had an athlete make the progress Michelle has made."

Consider her times over two seasons: The best she had last year in the 800-meter was 3:04; this year she's down to 2:38. In the 1500, she's gone from 6:56 to 5:17. She finished fourth in the J-Hawks Relays a week ago but still dropped 14 seconds off her personal best.

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It's in the long-distance 3000-meter, however, where Zikes really shines. The very first time she ran it indoors, she just hoped to crack 12 minutes and finished at 11:22.

She won the first meet of the outdoor season at Mount Pleasant in 11:11.85 and won twice more at invitationals in Davenport and Fort Madison. Though she came in third at last Saturday's Wilkinson Relays at Kingston Stadium, she matched her record time in far less than ideal conditions.

"My goal," Zikes says, "is to drop another 18 seconds and qualify for Drake."

While the Drake Relays are just 10 days away, Jefferson distance coach Tami Loan thinks her newfound star runner has what it takes to make it.

"She has a shot at it," says Loan, the girls cross country coach who competed in her first Boston Marathon on Monday. "She has a great attitude and is easy to coach. She works harder than anybody at practices. And what she's done so far is inspirational."

Zikes says she determined at the end of last year's track season to turn herself into a top-flight runner. She'd only gone out for the Jefferson cross country team in her freshman year as a fun way to make some new friends in a new school. Her best time was 24 minutes, putting her always at the tail end of the pack.

She skipped her sophomore cross country season due to an ankle injury but put in two unremarkable years on the junior varsity track team.

"To be honest," says Coach Loan, "I didn't see a lot of natural ability. She tried hard but didn't have much speed or endurance."

It was in a jayvee race at Iowa City late in the season when she dropped more than 20 seconds off her best 800 time that Zikes says was a turning point.

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"I saw that I could get to a higher level," she says. "And I decided to drive myself to become better."

At 154 pounds on her 5-foot-4 frame, she knew she had to lose weight and get in shape. So she began a healthier diet. "With my friends," she says, "I'd bring my own food, stuff like apples and celery."

And she put herself on a rigorous running regimen.

"I started out last summer running three or four times a week, and I kept gradually increasing my miles every week," Zikes explains. "By the end of the summer, I was running every day and was up to 35 miles a week. And I was running a lot of hills, too."

Since she spent six weeks on the Coe College campus participating in the Upward Bound academic program for gifted students, she worked out in the weight room there and on her own at the track.

"The more I challenged myself, the easier it became," she says.

By the time school started in the fall, she was at a well-toned 119 pounds. And Zikes became the top runner on the J-Hawk cross country team, clocking in at just under 17 minutes for her season's best (a full seven minutes faster than what she'd run as a freshman).

"I knew she'd been running all summer," says Loan. "But I really didn't know to what extent. I wasn't sure what to expect."

"I tell the girls all the time what they have to do in the off-season to improve, but much of the time it goes in one ear and out the other. To see what Michelle has accomplished, I wish I

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could clone her.”

A near straight-A student, Zikes is now thinking she might even get fast enough to run long distance in college. But whatever her future, veteran coach Calloway says she’s already left a lasting legacy in his long career.

“Michelle epitomizes what you hope for as a teacher and as a coach. She set a goal, and then she went out and did it. She is absolutely making the most of her potential.”