

Stephanie Jenks will run for Cal Bears

Written by Jim Ecker

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Stephanie Jenks could have accepted a college scholarship from just about any of the elite track and cross country programs in the country, but she decided to pick a school where she can help the team improve and get a great education.

Jenks, a senior at Linn-Mar High School, said Thursday that she's accepted a full athletic scholarship from the University of California at Berkeley to become a distance runner for the Golden Bears.

She called Shayla Houlihan, the distance coach at Cal, with the good news Thursday afternoon after going for a run after school.

"I'm excited. My heart is racing!," Jenks said while attending the district cross country meet at Seminole Valley Park in Cedar Rapids, about 30 minutes after calling Houlihan.

"I don't want to go to a college that is already good," she explained. "I want to go to a college where I am not going to be No. 1 and where I'm going to go in and contribute to a team in some way, shape or form and eventually get up there. I want to help other people get up there."

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"I think in a couple of years, especially with Shayla's workouts and everything else they have going on, it's going to work out well."

Jenks also took official visits to Arizona State (her second choice) and Oklahoma State.

Jenks won the Class 4A state cross country title as a freshman at Linn-Mar in 2012, but she's elected to run in open meets -- often against college athletes -- since her sophomore year and voluntarily gave up the rest of her prep cross country career.

Jenks probably would have won four state titles in cross country if she had continued running for Linn-Mar, but she's stayed with high school track her entire career and has established herself as one of the top distance runners in state history.

Jenks has won eight state titles in track and eight more championships at the Drake Relays with another full cycle remaining in 2016 before she heads west for college. She's twice been named the Gatorade Track Athlete of the Year in Iowa.

Jenks, 18, is also one of the top triathletes in the country for her age group and finished second at the Junior Olympics in China in August of 2014. She has set her triathlon career aside, however, to concentrate on running and is not sure if she'll compete in a triathlon again.

"I don't know if I'll ever go back," she said. "I love running."

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Shayla Houlihan was an outstanding runner at Sioux City East in high school. She ran at Northern Iowa and Utah in college and competed on the pro circuit for the Brooks organization for a few years before becoming a coach.

Houlihan's younger sister, Shelby, was also an outstanding distance runner in high school. She became an NCAA champion at Arizona State and is now running as a professional track athlete.

Shayla Houlihan excelled in the 3,000-meter steeplechase and might have an apt student in Jenks, who added the 400 hurdles to her repertoire this past spring at Linn-Mar.

"Anything is really a possibility," Jenks said. "I know Shayla is definitely thinking steeple, but I'm up for anything. I'm willing to run whatever I need to be able to help out."

And like the Houlihan sisters, Jenks might be inclined to give pro track a whirl once she graduates from college.

Jenks, who is a 4.0 student, plans to study math and science at Cal, which is one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country.

"Their academics are amazing," she said.