

Rhody Runners, Throwers, Jumpers at Top of A-10

It's hard enough to develop cohesive, winning teams in sports like basketball in which there are common skills—shooting, passing and rebounding. Even baseball, with its diverse positions, still requires that players be adept at the similar tasks of hitting, catching, and throwing.

But in track and field, where a sprinter may not even see a teammate's performance in the shot put, it takes something special to bind these athletes with disparate talents and events into a unit.

At the University of Rhode Island, the men's and women's track teams have developed into both athletic and academic powerhouses largely because of the drive of men's coach John Copeland and women's coach Laurie Feit-Melnick to instill in their charges a deep respect for teamwork, excellence, and discipline.

This past winter Rhode Island dominated the Atlantic 10 indoor track championships, winning its third straight women's title and second straight men's crown. And just this past spring, the men's track and field squad won its second straight A-10 outdoor championship and the women won their first.

For the third straight year, Feit-Melnick won Coach of the Year honors, while Copeland was so honored this past year.

"We try to bring in solid student-athletes who are well-rounded," said Feit-Melnick, who like Copeland also coaches cross-country. "We know that if a student is committed to her classes and wants to compete on the track, then we know we are going to have success."

"I feel very strongly that track is a team sport, and while you have individual events with individual athletes, it's the team that wins the championships," Copeland said.

Think about that for a minute. Both coaches are successful at getting the sprinter to relate to the pole-vaulter, the hammer thrower to the distance runner, and the steeplechase competitor to the javelin thrower. Many times, these groups don't even work out together or compete at the same venues. At least in most team sports, everyone is on the same field or in the same arena.

On the men's side, Copeland coaches 15 cross-country runners, 50 indoor track and field athletes, and 50 outdoor competitors. While continuing to achieve excellence, Copeland said it's getting harder. "Eight years ago, we had eight scholarships, but this year we had 2.8."

And while some athletes benefit from the URI Centennial Scholarships, which award scholarships based on academic merit, Copeland said the team does it all with minimal scholarship support and few frills.

"People should know that my cross-country athlete or track athlete is just as important to me as the star is on any of the high profile sports here," Copeland said. "And my best kid is treated the same as the kid who has never scored a point."

Academics are not a problem for Copeland because when he meets a prospect, he tells him that academic performance is essential.

"We also try to teach a little bit of humility," Copeland added. "As a coach, you may run into athletes who think they are better than others. That's not what we're about here."

What Copeland has been about is winning. Since 1982, the men's track team has won four A-10 titles and has posted 10 undefeated seasons.

Feit-Melnick said this has been the best year for URI women's track and cross-country. It's

worth noting that the women's team posted only three first-place finishes in the spring outdoor championships, but team depth led Rhody to the A-10 title. But for Feit-Melnick, success is more than titles. Her teams boast 19 student-athletes on the dean's list and a combined grade point average of 3.18. The women's cross-country team posts a grade point average of 3.49. Feit-Melnick who has run the teams since 1992, said it has taken many years to build the team.

She coaches between 14 and 16 cross-country athletes and 45 for both the indoor and outdoor track seasons. Like Copeland, Feit-Melnick's squad has benefited from Centennial Scholarships.

Feit-Melnick is also proud that many of her athletes come from Rhode Island, and next year, two Rhode Island state high school champions, Westerly's Emily Anderson and North Kingstown's Lindsay Vieira, will be joining the squad.

The amazing thing about all of this success for both the men's and women's squads has been that they have done it all without an outdoor track or a cross-country facility. URI's track is in major need of a complete rehabilitation, and until it is completed, it cannot be used for meets or practices. The athletes, however, still use it for training. The Mackall Field House, considered one of the best indoor venues in the A-10, is set for a \$500,000 rehabilitation program in the near future.

But you won't hear any whining from the student-athletes.

Erin Silvering, the first URI athlete to compete in the women's NCAA cross-country championship since 1993, said athletes have to be determined in track and field. "It's not like basketball where everyone does the same event," said the senior who graduated in May. "We all look to each other for support. It was very touching when one of our freshmen came up to me this year and told me 'I am so proud of you,'" said the Winifred Keaney award winner as the top women's student-athlete.

"Everyone's very talented," Silvering said, adding that "the coach chooses good people. I am really sad about leaving."

Megan O'Shea, a freshman from Long Island who competes in the steeplechase, the 3,000 meters, and cross-country, said she felt fortunate to learn from such a great group of seniors. "Track is unique because you have all these different people, but it all gels really well."

Pascale Delaunay, a sophomore from Clairmont, California, who competes in the long jump, triple jump, and heptathlon, said she found the team very welcoming and willing to work together. "And the coaches have it right; they put academics first," said the electrical engineering major.

Kelly Martin, a senior middle distance runner from North Providence who graduated in May and was a two-time A-10 champ, says her education at URI was top notch. "My commitment in the classroom went hand-in-hand with my performance on the track. The coaches are excellent because you can talk with them about everything, and my teammates are great. We all hang out together."

On the men's side, Copeland is looking for student-athletes who will represent URI well. "We need student-athletes who can make a year-round commitment."

And Copeland also looks for student-athletes who value community service. "We do a field day for West Kingston Elementary

School, and we run a 'learn by doing' program at local high schools, and then we all help put on the Rhody Classic, a meet that attracts 1,200 high school athletes each year to URI."

Like the women, the men compete in a variety of events, and they support each other. "Before you warm up, you cheer for teammates competing in other events," said Albert White, a senior who competed in the 100 and 200 meters, the 4 x 100 relay, and triple jump before graduating in May. "Whatever you put into it is what you get out of it."

Senior captain Tony Lordo of Staten Island, New York, a two-time New England and six-time A-10 champ in the high jump who also competed in the 100 and 200 meters and the 4 x 100 relay, was the shortest high jumper in Division 1 track on the East Coast at 5 feet, 9 inches. "Coach is very fair and he is a good motivator. He definitely sets high standards for us to accomplish. He tells us to always be responsible for our academics as well.

"Because of our success, other A-10 teams look up to us," said Lordo, a May graduate.

White says the team has now become a target of its conference opponents. "They're always hunting us."

Colin Lowney, a senior captain from Pearl River, New York, who graduated in May, said competing for URI track has been a great experience. "Coach Copeland has made a big difference in my career," Lowney said. "He's built trust, and he's a guy you can talk to. He ran the hurdles in college and his knowledge is what attracted me to URI."

Senior Captain James "Jocko" Rooney, who closed out his career in the spring with a record-setting performance in the shot put and by being named the A-10's Most Outstanding Field Performer for his second-year running, said everyone on the team works toward a common goal—winning championships. "We don't have a lot of scholarships, so everyone works at many different events," Rooney said. "But it keeps everyone fresh. Coach Copeland, though, is the reason for the success of the program."

"We need student-athletes who can make a year-round commitment."

Men's track coach John Copeland



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