

Local athlete excels at track and field

By Alexis Dobranowski

Keep your eyes out for Alicia Dobranowski...that is, if you can keep up with her.

The Stouffville native is making a name for herself on the university track and field circuit. A student at Halifax's Dalhousie University, she competes in the indoor pentathlon and outdoor heptathlon as well as relay running events.

In March, she took home a silver medal in the women's pentathlon at the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) track and field championships in Montreal behind Calgary's Jessica Zelinka, who's ranked fifth in the world.

Alicia, 22, said it's her greatest achievement in athletics thus far. "It's really a culmination of years of training," she said, adding that the media attention she's received about the event has "made it all very real."

At the meet, she achieved personal bests in shot put, hurdles and the 800-metre. The last event of the day, she "ran for her life" to hang on to her position. "The 800-metre race I ran (at CIS) was a very strategically planned race. My coach and I discussed what I had to do before the race began and I went over it in my head several times. I was in second place at the time and knew that if I ran the race as planned I would hang on to second, and I did."

Pent-athletes compete in five events - hurdles, high jump, long jump, shot put and 800 metres. For heptathlon, competitors add on a 200-metre race and javelin. Alicia said she doesn't have a favourite.

"I guess if I had a favourite, I'd only compete in one event," she laughed. She first got involved in track and field in elementary school where she participated in both cross-country and track and field at the local track meets. It was at a summer sports camp that she was spotted by a track coach.

"Dan Parsons, who already coached my cousin, approached me and asked if I wanted to train with them." The following season, she trained with Dan at

University of Toronto.

"That's when I started getting more seriously into it. Dan Parsons and my team coach at Unionville High School, Dave Hunt, were really influential. I realized that it was a sport I wanted to pursue." Now, she trains five to six times a week, sometimes twice a day. Her training includes weight workouts, hurdle workouts, speed endurance, short speed and shot put.

Though her training schedule and track meets keep her extremely busy, the fourth-year recreation management student manages to maintain a high academic average. She has a spot on the Dean's List and has twice been an Academic All-Canadian, an honour awarded to varsity athletes who maintain an average above 80 per cent or a grade point above 3.43. Alicia said her involvement in track helps her stay disciplined and balanced.

"Throughout high school and now university, track has helped me stay focused. Knowing that I will be practising for two hours each day helps me allocate the rest of my time accordingly. And, taking time out of each day to be physically active gives my mind a break and helps me refocus."

She said the track team also offers her a positive social environment. "I am really lucky to train with the athletes and coaches that I do. We are a close-knit group. They are talented people."

Alicia's other most memorable moment came at the CIS nationals in 2005, when the Dalhousie women's 4 x 200 metre relay team blew away the competition to win the gold medal. "Winning gold with the relay team was a race I'll never forget. There is something very special about winning something as a team."

This season, she has been named Female Athlete of the Week twice by Dalhousie and once by the Atlantic University Sport (AUS) association. She currently holds the Dalhousie's hurdle and pentathlon record and the AUS hurdle record. With one year of eligibility left, Alicia hopes next season will be even more successful than this one. "And after that, I hope to continue with my track career. I'll continue competing outdoors and hope to make a national team."

Alicia's parents continue to reside in Stouffville. Along with her three sisters, they are extremely proud of her success.



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Alicia at a track meet hosted by York University last summer

Alicia on the podium after accepting her silver medal at the Canadian Interuniversity Sport track and field championships

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this SPORTING LIFE

ON THE RUN



By Robin Steckley

Spring has arrived and for a runner that means the long awaited race season has begun, including the best known of long distance races, the Boston Marathon.

Even the most running-illiterate know that a marathon is a very long race - 26.2 miles. The origins of this challenge began in Greece in 490 B.C. when a messenger ran the 25 miles from Marathon to Athens to inform the general they had won the battle and Athens was safe. Upon imparting his message he immediately fell over dead.

Greece won the war and man had a new challenge; to find a way to run a marathon and not die. This was challenging enough without adding another one point two miles, which the Olympic governing body did in 1908 to allow the king and queen of England to remain in their royal box while viewing the finish.

But long distance runners love every step and none more than Helen Thompson, who lives in Ballantrae. Just after retiring in 2004, Helen went to purchase a pair of walking shoes. Slightly overweight and out of shape, she had decided it was time to start exercising. Forty minutes later she left the store, somewhat befuddled, carrying a Learn to Run registration and a pair of brand new running shoes.

This was a defining moment in Helen's life. Initially just the distance from one street light to the next was a huge goal. Then to run for one full minute, then two, right up to 10. Finally the challenge of her first 5k race with the fear and excitement of being tested. Could she do it? Helen finished this first race in a time of 36 minutes and went on to run several 10k races, marathons and half marathons with a personal best time of four hours, 43 minutes.

Yes Helen found a new passion in life after 65. As a young senior she would encourage you to start slowly and find your own pace. She said that running with a group is great encouragement and helps when you feel like quitting. Recovery is longer as you get older, so give yourself time between runs and don't compare yourself to those 10, 20 or 30 years younger.

Helen runs to have fun. She sees every run as a new challenge to go farther and faster to race against herself. She runs to be healthy and is a clear example that healthy active living works. She is no longer overweight; her cholesterol is now normal and she has more energy than she did 10 years ago.

She runs for others, using each of her races to raise money for The Rose of Sharon Charity for Young Mothers in York Region. It is a charity close to her heart both as a mother and a nurse, and she sees it as her way of giving back.

And yes, Helen will attempt to conquer the famous Boston Marathon April 16. She will be running 10 minutes, walking one minute, from start to finish, loving every minute; a champion!

See you on the roads.

Stouffville resident Robin Steckley, who has completed marathons including Boston and Ottawa, has been running competitively since 1995. She plans to run in an 80k 'ultra' this summer.