

Published January 1st, 2014

Medalist and Acalanes Track and Field Coach Shares Joy of the Sport

By Michael Sakoda



Joy Upshaw, far right, runs hurdles for Acalanes High School in 1979. Photo provided

In 2013, Acalanes track and field coach, Joy Upshaw, won three gold medals - 100, 200, and 80-meter hurdles - and a silver in the long jump at the World Masters Athletics Championships in Brazil, the latest accomplishments in a decorated career.

In 2011, just a week after her 50th birthday, Upshaw set world records for W50 in the long jump - 17 feet, 11 inches - and the indoor 200-meter - 26.24 - at a Masters Championship in Albuquerque, N.M.

But breaking records is nothing new for the Upshaw family, as Joy put it, "We're a track family."

Her father, Monte, broke Jesse Owens' high school long jump record in 1954 (25 feet, 4.25 inches). "We never heard the stories from him," Upshaw recalled. "But other people would tell us about how good he was."

That's where Upshaw says her love of the sport began, and it wasn't long before she was competing for herself. "They used to have the Merriewood Relays out here near Fairview," she said. "I went to Springhill, and we competed against Merriewood, and Happy Valley ... a fun little relay meet in Burton Valley."

In 1968, Upshaw and her family moved from Berkeley to Lafayette where she and her three siblings competed for Acalanes. "The experience at Acalanes was great," she said. "We had great coaches like Kris Brown and Scott Brady-Smith ... we had a really good team ... broke a lot of records."

Her siblings, Chip, who was on Acalanes' last championship football team in 1981, Merry and Grace all ran track for the Dons.

"I remember after Grace's grad night at Acalanes she got home at four in the morning," said Upshaw. "I woke her up the next day and said, 'Let's go to a track meet,' and we did ... and she jumped a 19 feet, 3 inches and set a school record."

Upshaw said the memory gives her a 'no excuse' policy with her kids. "When they say, 'I was up all night studying,' I tell them, 'So? You can still go break a school record,'" she said. Though, her sister did go on to long jump for team USA at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics.

After high school, Upshaw ran track for Cal State Hayward where she trained with Olympic coaches and received a degree in kinesiology with a dance minor. "My mom was really musically inclined," she said. "So she always kept us in music, dance and art."

While Upshaw isn't dancing anymore, she did teach aerobics for a number of years after graduating from college. "I was teaching at the Walnut Creek Racquet Club in 1983, and the football coach at Acalanes had me come in and teach aerobics to the team during their summer workouts," she said with a smile.

But sharing her love of track is her real passion, and she's been doing it at every level - from coaching the Dons, to helping her sister, Grace, train for the Olympics, from coaching on several U.S. National teams, to founding the Jack Rabbits Track Club in 1998.

"The purpose of Jack Rabbits is to teach kids the joy of track and field ... to learn the sport and understand it," she said. "We work on posture and running mechanics and drills and introduce them to the long jump and hurdles, relays, shotput and discus."

Upshaw is a mother of two, and unsurprisingly her daughters are runners. Her oldest, Sunny, was a standout at Gunn High School and is now a senior at Cal on a track scholarship; while her youngest, Windy, is a freshman on the track team at Acalanes.

So why has a world class athlete and coach returned to Lamorinda? The answer lies in her fondest memory.

"The best feeling was having the baton on the relay leg in the FAL Championship and winning as a team for Acalanes," she said. "(Lamorinda) is a just a great setting ... a nice community ... I want to give back and see Acalanes do well again."



100m (13.24 1st)



Upshaw winning her medal for the 100-meter hurdle in Brazil.

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA