

Mercy track team takes the fast lane

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Quick, what Mercy sports team completely dominated the Private Parochial League throughout the 1980s?

If you answered the basketball team, you were wrong.

To find the answer, you'd have to travel up the hill behind the school where the track field is located. On that hill, the Monarchs have earned nine consecutive league titles, and are on the verge of claiming their 10th.

During their nine-year reign as queens of the track, the Monarchs have lost just one league contest.

And over that span, Mercy has consistently ranked among the top girls' track programs in Section 5 — as evidenced by performances in various invationals and in the Section 5 tournament.

This year is no exception. At the His and Hers Invitational at Franklin High on May 5, Mercy finished sixth in the overall standings — despite being compared with co-ed schools that sent both boys' and girls' teams.

At the Aquinas Relays May 12, which took place at the University of Rochester, Mercy finished second among the girls' teams and third overall.

That continued a trend in which a number of Mercy runners and relay teams have recorded some of the best performances this season in Section 5.

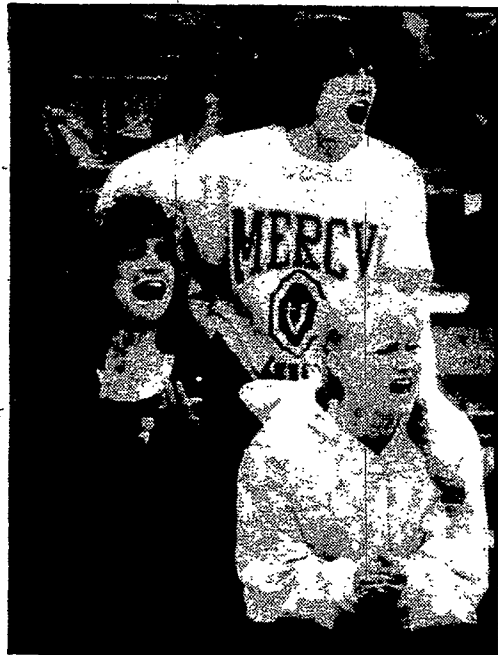
Maggie Whelehan, for example, has registered the second best time in the 800-meter run and ranks eighth in the 1500-meter run in Section 5. Mercy's 1,600-meter relay team ranks third in the section, and the 3,200-meter relay team ranks a respectable fourth.

The team's 400-meter relay team, and such individual performers as Tisha LaMagna, Gabbi LaMagna and Christina Arena rank among the top 10 in their events.

But the team has yet to achieve the recognition the basketball team has earned.

Third-year coach Tim Jones acknowledged that part of the problem is that the Monarchs compete in a league where they find little competition. In a tri-meet at Mercy on May 10, the Monarchs scored 120 points, while Bishop Kearney (20) and Nazareth (8) finished way behind.

"It's frustrating," Jones said. "The girls like to go against teams that are competitive."



Mercy track team members cheer on teammates at the Aquinas Relays May 12.

The Aquinas Relays gave Mercy a chance to do that, and the Monarchs responded by finishing second to Fairport, the defending sectional champion.

Jones said that among the team's strengths are its depth and the willingness of his players to try new events. At the Relays, for example, Gabbi, Mimi and Tisha LaMagna, and Shannon O'Neil combined to win the 800-meter relay, an event they had never tried before. Similarly, Colleen O'Neil, Allison Adin, Amy Martin and Whelehan combined to win the distance medley.

Meanwhile, Gabbi LaMagna (long jump), Mimi LaMagna (triple jump) and Arena (shot put) all recorded personal bests.

The team's improvement in field events, in fact, was cited by Jones as the area in which he has seen the most growth over the five years that he has served as assistant or head coach.

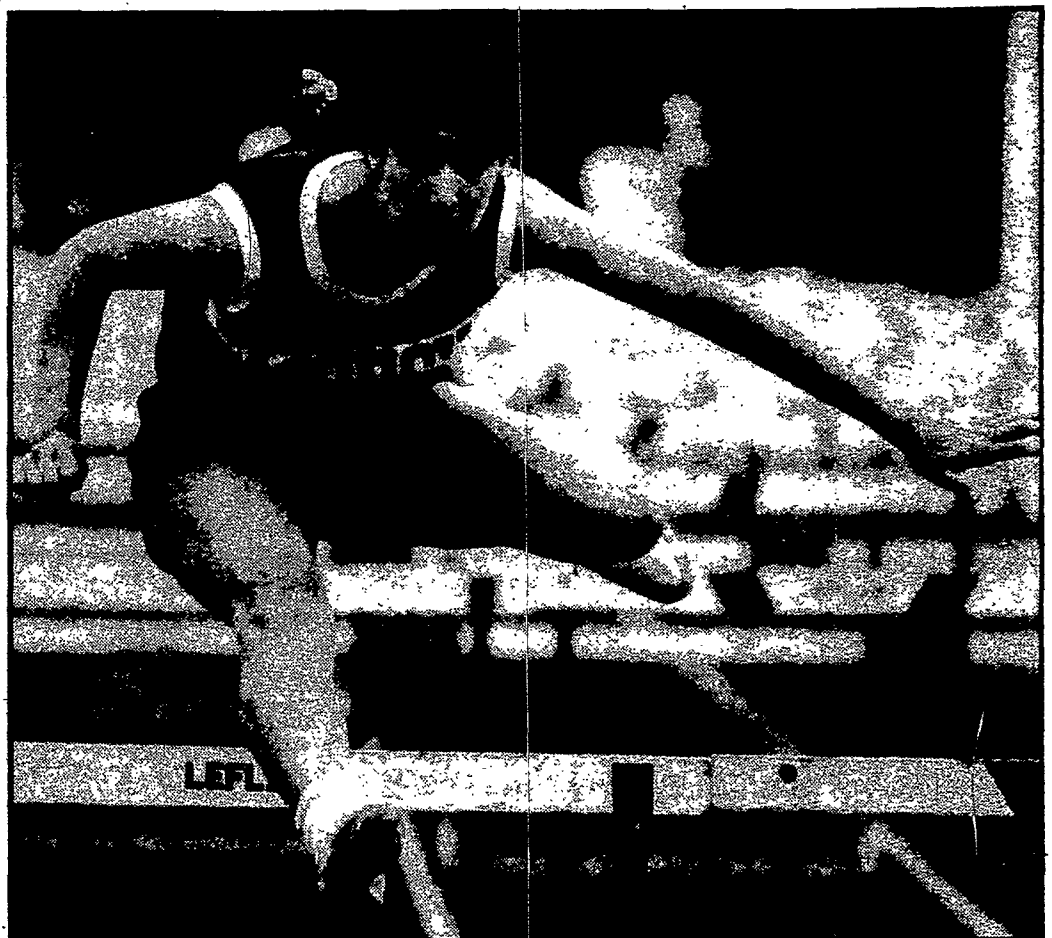
"It's been a steady progress," Jones noted. "Every year it seems like we're weaker and weaker in fewer and fewer events."

The coach also suggested that the school's cross country team — which he has guided since it formed and has consistently been among the best in Section 5 each fall — is helping the track and field team in the spring. He pointed to the 3,200-meter relay team's improvement to the point where it is among the section's best.

Yet the relay team — like the rest of the team — still has not gained wide-scale recognition, and thus surprises opponents.

Jones said at this point of the season, Mercy is ready for the sectionals. His major concern is keeping his runners healthy.

And come sectionals?



Tisha LaMagna, her face showing the strain of her effort, passes over a hurdle in the 400-meter shuttle hurdle race. She combined with her sisters, Gabbi and Mimi, and with Shannon O'Neil, to win the 800-meter relay race at the Aquinas Relays.



Kim Smith clears the bar in the high jump, an event in which she has leapt 4'11".

Mercy might once more take some teams by surprise. But if they keep running like they have in the past, someday the Monarchs' best kept secret might just get the recognition the basketball team has earned.

Maybe then people will realize which team at Mercy has won the most league titles over the past decade.



Maggie Whelehan, who has emerged as one of the best middle-distance runners in Section 5, races for the finish line as the anchor of Mercy's winning distance medley relay team.

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SPORTS TRIVIA

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Who succeeded Don Shula as head coach of the Baltimore Colts?

A: _____

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