

OWEN HEADED BACK EAST

By DON SIKORSKI
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Even from the early elementary school days racing around Owen Bell Park, Meghan Owen had the look of a promising talent; a runner with a very bright future ahead of her. Now a 20 year old collegiate sophomore, the name Meghan Owen is known nationally amongst the who's who of distance running, the result of a stellar high school career filled with athletic and academic accolades: a three-time Connecticut State Open Cross-Country champion, a two-time Footlocker finalist, a five time All-American, and a member of the National Honor Society. With these credentials, Owen received plenty of attention from colleges around the country before deciding on the University of North Carolina. And while Owen handled the transition from the small town of Killingly to the large campus life in Chapel Hill rather admirably, her heart still seemed to remain in New England. That was the basis for her recent decision to leave the Tar Heel state after three semesters and officially enroll at Providence College later this month.

Meghan Owen's change of school colors is big news amongst the college running ranks for a lot of reasons. Her move to Providence strengthens a Lady Friars cross-country team that was 3rd in the nation this past fall, led by individual champion Kim Smith of New Zealand. North Carolina's team, in which Owen was a significant top 5 contributor in her first two seasons, was no slouch either. Under Coach Mike Whittlesey, a former distance running standout at UConn, the Tar Heels became one of the top women's programs in the country, finishing 10th in the NCAA Championships this past fall despite the graduation loss of 2003 national champion Shalane Flanagan a season ago. Whittlesey's teams had a New England flavor, with Flanagan a Massachusetts native and former Connecticut state champion Brian McGovern of Fairfield currently the #1 runner on the men's squad. Owen capped a successful freshman cross-country season as the Tar Heels #4 runner, finishing 12th in the ACC to help her team to victory and 170th overall in the NCAA championship race. She also ran well this past fall, improving to 147th in the national race as the Tar Heels #5 runner. Owen's consistent improvement under Whittlesey's guidance made her decision to leave the program that much more difficult.

"It was a really tough decision," said Owen of her choice to leave North Carolina. "At first, I had thought that going to a school far away was a good choice. But I really wanted to come back to the Northeast. I don't regret that I stared out at North Carolina," said Owen of her colligate choice. "I liked the team, but I realized that I wanted to be closer to home and to try something new." Friars Coach Ray Treacy, himself a 1982 PC graduate and former national class runner, has build a terrific program at Providence and may have found himself another gem. Although Owen's immediate transfer status won't allow her to compete in this year's indoor or outdoor track season for the Friars (cross-country status is pending based on release documentation being filed), she will be joining a team already loaded with talent. "I'm excited to be a part of Coach Treacy's program," proclaimed Owen. Despite losing 2004 NCAA champion Kim Smith to graduation, Providence will again be considered a top contender both in the conference and nationally. Returning PC senior Fiona Crombie is the team's top returnee and finished 10th overall at the NCAA Championships.

Based on her progression as a distance runner to this point, look for Owen to have continued success at Providence. A dominant runner right from her first days at Killingly High School, Owen finished 3rd in the XC State Open as a freshman and a week later, topped that performance with a 2nd place finish at the New England meet. That Spring, Owen ran 5:11 for the mile to shatter her school record. She wouldn't lose to a Connecticut high school runner ever again. State Open and New England titles piled up in both Cross-Country and Track, with Owen lower he personal bests in the mile to 4:56 as a sophomore and a remarkable 4:50 as a junior. She capped her senior season with an outstanding 8th place finish in the Footlocker Nationals (1 place behind her future UNC teammate Katelyn Kaltenbach). As a runner, what is most impressive about Owen's potential is the way Killingly Coach Alden Miner, himself a former middle distance ace at Norwich Free Academy and at the University of Connecticut, based Owen's training plan with a long term progression and improvement in mind. "I ran relatively low mileage in high school," said Owen of Coach Miner's program. "That left me with room to improve." Many top level high school runners often struggle with the increased volume and intensity of a college program, but Owen's transition was a smooth one. "The training and the races at UNC were more intense. I liked the program; it was good having a team and having other runners to train with. I learned how to compete for your team. The more difficult transition was going from a small high school to a big university."

Owen's future goals, besides adjusting to a new school and a new program, are to compete in some local races and look to improve at the 1,500 and 3,000 meter distances this indoor season. Treacy's coaching credentials make him one of the most respected coaches in the country; he was named the 2004 Men's and Women's Northeast Region XC Coach of the Year in 2004, has coached 109 All-Americans, 116 Big East Champions, led his teams to 13 Conference Championships, coached 9 NCAA individual champions, and has produced 10 Olympians, most recently Mark Carroll and Amy Rudolph. My bet is that Meghan Owen will soon be adding to that list of credentials.

Racing Roundup

Paula Radcliffe will pass on a chance to compete in this year's Boston Marathon to run in the London Marathon again on April 17th. Radcliffe, 31, has earned marathon victories in London (2002 and 2003), Chicago (2003), and in New York City (2004).....America's Dathan Ritzenheim claimed one of the most unexpected victories of the season at the Reebok International Cross-Country race in Belfast. The 22 year-old Ritzenheim, who left the University of Colorado to turn professional last year, ran away from a strong field to win the muddy nine kilometer race at Stormont Castle by 10 seconds over Kenya's Ernest Meil and Barnabas Kosgei..... In what should be a true test of finding the time and energy to train at a national class level with children, U.S. 3000 and 5000 meter record holder Bob Kennedy and his wife Melina recently gave birth to twins. The 34 year-old Kennedy is a two-time Olympian and the only U.S. runner to go under 13 minutes for 5,000 meters. He dropped out in his marathon debut last November at the ING New York City Marathon.

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