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Like father, like daughter

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by **Joshua Cooley**
Staff Writer

Apr. 7, 2004

No doubt about it: Churchill's new coach is a Dunston

Jill Milla couldn't help herself.

During Walter Johnson High's Woodward Relays on a windy, rainy Saturday, Milla ran down the infield grass to where Greg Dunston, her father and the meet's director, was setting up some hurdles. The girls 4x100-meter shuttle hurdles event had just finished, and Churchill, Milla's team, had just beaten Walter Johnson, Dunston's team, by .03 seconds. Milla playfully rubbed it in and got a bear hug in return.

But 10 events later in the girls 4x300-meter shuttle hurdles, Walter Johnson squeaked out a win over Churchill by .14 seconds. Dunston, ever the nice guy, didn't return the favor. Instead, Dad quietly basked in the fact that, although Milla's girls beat his in overall team points, 47-43, he won Saturday's combined title on the strength of Walter Johnson's boys finishing third (46 points) and Churchill's boys only placing 10th (21).

"I didn't say much," Dunston said. "I just smiled."

So it goes for the Dunston family tree, which annually gathers at the longstanding Woodward Relays and spreads its roots into the local track community. Dunston, 54, the family's track patriarch and a 33-year coaching veteran, started the meet in 1973 at old Woodward High and has kept it running ever since.

The meet is truly a family affair. All four Dunston kids were present to help run the meet -- Jill (30), her sister Erin (22), and her two brothers, Kelly (28) and Shaun (25). Spouses are not exempt from service either. Jill's husband, German, and Kelly's wife, Sarah, were also there.

"Everybody knows they have to be here and they have a job," Milla said. "I make sure everyone knows they can't have any plans for this weekend every year."



J. Adam Fenster/The Gazette

Longtime Walter Johnson track coach Greg Dunston and his daughter, Jill Milla, who's in her first year as Churchill's coach, share a brief moment of respite on an otherwise busy day during the 32nd annual Woodward Relays Saturday. Started by Dunston in 1973, the meet is a family affair.

The big difference for the family at this year's meet is that it boasted two head coaches instead of just one. Milla, who has also coached high-school swimming in Montgomery County for eight years, started coaching track in 1999 as an assistant at Churchill. She followed former Churchill head coach Dan Reeks to Sherwood last year and returned to the Potomac school this season to run her own program.

"I think it's great," her brother Kelly said. "It makes it really funny when we go out to dinner with the whole family because all my sister and father talk about is track. All their kids can't get them to talk about anything else. It's a real passion for her."

But track didn't always come easy for the oldest Dunston child.

'Mr. Wizard'

Jill, a 1992 graduate of Richard Montgomery, was quite a handful at times for her father, who coached her three years during his brief tenure at the Rockville school. Dunston quickly learned that he had to make a distinction between dad and coach.

There was the time when Jill started to cry at a meet because she thought her father would be upset if she didn't finish her events even though she felt some pain while running the high hurdles. Another time, she and her father, who has always had a soft spot for distance events, were doing 300-meter strides for intermediate hurdle training when she started yelling at him, "You're just trying to make me a distance runner!"

"Three hundreds are not distance!" he responded.

Dunston's favorite story about Jill is rated R. During a practice her junior year, Jill started badgering her father about the amount of time he spent watching her train as opposed to her teammates. When he continued to not give her the attention she wanted, Jill -- in the middle of practice for all to hear -- called to her father something that's not fit for print. Mouths all around the track dropped. Dunston calmly walked over to his daughter and told her they'd discuss this further on the ride home.

"Look, I understand you're upset with me, but calling me an [expletive] in front of all the other kids is probably not appropriate," Dunston told Jill in the car.

Eventually, she worked out a solution, calling on her knowledge of old science shows on TV.

"OK, from now on, I'm going to call you 'Mr. Wizard' when you're not paying attention," Jill said. "I'm just going to yell, 'Mr. Wizard!' and you'll know that you aren't paying attention to me."

Peculiar, yes, but it was a breakthrough for the pair.

"After that, we had a great relationship," Dunston said.

Big roster, big challenge

Despite all the colorful episodes, Dunston turned his daughter into a standout runner. She qualified for states each year in the high hurdles and set a record in the event at the old Rocketton meet. She was also a part of some

state-level relay teams in the 4x100, 4x200 and 4x400.

Milla, who was also a strong butterfly and sprint freestyle swimmer in high school, was good enough in track and swimming to compete in both sports at Slippery Rock University (Pa.), a Division II school. She continued to compete in the high hurdles and branched out into the heptathlon and made the Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference championships each year in both sports.

Once out of college, she only wanted to coach swimming, but her father talked her into track -- again, with some resistance. When former Churchill coach Sean Joyce was looking for an assistant in 1999, Dunston mentioned his daughter.

Said Dunston: "[Joyce] e-mailed her, so she thought about it and she yelled at me and swore at me a little bit. Then she said, 'I'll do it.' Ever since then, she's loved it."

In taking over at Churchill, Milla has inherited a program that is long on numbers but short on tradition. Its lone state championship was a boys title in 1976, and neither the boys nor the girls squads have placed higher than eighth at the state meet in the last five years. The program's only real claim to fame recently has been 2001 graduate Stephen Hayes, who swept the Class 4A outdoor state titles in the 1,600- and 3,200-meter runs three years ago and is now a junior competing at the University of Pennsylvania.

But Milla is hoping that an enormous roster of 180 regulars will give her the depth to do well in the team's first season in Division I, the county's toughest division. Churchill's boys and girls are both currently 2-0 in dual-meet competition, having already defeated Blake and Paint Branch. The Bulldogs' staunchest foes are still on the horizon: Gaithersburg on April 20 and Northwest on April 27.

"My goal is for the kids to really see improvements in their events," Milla said. "I want to come in and make sure the kids -- regardless of how the team scores are going or if we're winning a meet -- are improving on their times and doing better in their events. As long as they're doing that, whether my team won or lost a meet is secondary. If they can come out and say they're happy with how they ran and happy with their time, then we won. But I'd definitely like to see my kids show we belong in Division I."

According to those close to her, Milla is the right person for the job.

"She's good," said junior hurdler Katie Beckett, who competed under Milla as a freshman. "She definitely knows what she's talking about, and she's very good at conveying it to the runners. During the meets, she's really supportive and really good at giving advice."

According to Dunston, "What scares me is that I don't want to tell her all my secrets because I don't want her to use them against me. ... She's a really good coach now, but she's going to get much better because she's starting to learn the other events."

Not surprisingly, much of Milla's coaching philosophies stem from Dunston. His biggest influence on her was his emphasis on sportsmanship and his creed of "meek, mild and humble."

"My dad is my role model," Milla said. "It took several years for me to come back and tell him he was the best coach I ever had. ... I hope to be half the

coach he is."

Other coaching similarities exist between father and daughter.

"Oh definitely," Beckett said. "It's kind of the same personality and attitude - just definitely happy most of the time and she's able to motivate runners to do better."

Like Dunston, Milla doesn't believe in cutting kids. If you come to a Churchill practice, just like at Walter Johnson, you'll find a niche.

"She wants to work with every kid regardless," Dunston said. "It doesn't matter how good they are. She'll give every kid a chance. She realizes that every kid should have a chance to try whatever event they want. If you have a three-foot hurdler come up and say, 'I'd like to try hurdles,' she'll let them try hurdles and work with them. And yet she has a hard edge to her, too. She doesn't put up with any crap. If a kid is coming up to her and complaining about running a race, she just says, 'You need to suck it up and do what you can.'"

It appears, at least at an early glance, that the inherent Milla feistiness that her father had to contend with for all those years is translating into coaching success.

"She definitely works us hard," Beckett said. "It wasn't exactly what we were used to, especially coming back the first few weeks. It was tough. But she was honest with us and she was up front and said, 'I'm going to be tough, but it's going to help us. After we get in the first few meets, it's going to help you out.' And she was right."

Just like Dad.

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