

VanLaar: The Best Gets Better

By Al Palmeri

What fuels the heart of a state champion? If you answered "A desire to be the best," go to the head of the class. That's where you'll find Allendale High School senior Gina VanLaar.

Entering her final season of high school competition, VanLaar has won three state championships. She ran to individual Class D state crowns in her sophomore and senior years in cross country, and won the mile run as a sophomore in track.

This track and field season marks her final chance to carry Allendale's colors in a state meet. Last year, she finished second in both the 800- and 1,600-meter runs at the Class D state meet in Traverse City.

Judging from her first outing this season, VanLaar seems intent on going out in style. She won the mile and two-mile events at the Ferris State College indoor track invitational in rapid fashion — 5:27.63 in the mile and 11:53.18 in the two-mile.

Fast stepping? Her closest Class D competitor was nearly one minute behind her in the mile and more than two minutes slower in the two-mile.

"It's hard sometimes to get competition," VanLaar said. "There's some good runners in Class D, but there's not a lot of them."

VanLaar is used to being in quick company. She regularly trains with the Allendale boys team and likes to put herself through tough workouts, according to her coaches.

Jim Wallinga, a Grand Valley State College student who coaches the Falcons with fellow student John Vojtko, has noticed consistency in VanLaar's training which is not always evident among other Allendale runners.

"She doesn't take that (much) outside motivation as other runners," Wallinga said. "She's always striving to do more in workouts."

Times like those posted at Ferris State are the result of VanLaar's year-round training, Wallinga said. Training with the boys team, he added, does nothing to curb that success.

"That's just her," Wallinga said. "She wants always to push herself, and that's a way she can push herself. I would say it's (running with the boys) is unusual. That's what a high-class runner she is."

Though hard work has paid off in fast times, VanLaar is after more than simply beating the clock. For her, track and field has served as a way to build friendships in her teen-age years.

"It's fun meeting other people from other schools," VanLaar said. "It's different from softball or anything like that. It's more of a sport where you can talk to other people and meet them."



Gina VanLaar