

King's Benford a triple threat at PSL track meet

By Tom Markowski
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Like most gifted athletes, Marla Benford has plenty of confidence. The Martin Luther King High junior doesn't mean to be boastful when she says she can compete in just about all the track and field events.

"I've done just about all the events at one time or another," she said. "If coach asked me to run even the distance races, like the 3,200 (meter) relay, I'd do that, too."

To which her coach, Charles Lewis, replied: "That was just smoke-talking."

Perhaps. But tell Benford she *can't* do something and it makes her even more determined to do it, and do it well.



Marla Benford

Benford, one of the state's top hurdlers, will defend her title in the 100-meter high hurdles Thursday in the Detroit Public School League track and field championships at King. The field events will be at 4 p.m. today, with the running events at noon Thursday.

A versatile athlete who also starts on the PSL champion basketball team, Benford is the defending PSL long-jump champion. She was second last year in the 300 low hurdles, a finish that haunts her still.

On Saturday at Grosse Pointe South, Benford qualified for the Class A meet by placing first in those three events, a feat she accomplished as a sophomore. She thought she had qualified in a fourth event, but her 800 relay team, which placed second, was disqualified because of an illegal lane change.

"We just have to forget those things," she said. "People make mistakes."

Benford hates to lose and is rarely satisfied with her efforts. She believes every day she can do better than the day before.

ROUNDUP

Her competitiveness comes from her mother, Sheila, a former track coach, and her stepfather, Aaron Willingham, an assistant track coach (boys and girls) at King, who specializes in field events. Benford's parents, along with Lewis, work with her every day, pointing out flaws in her techniques.

"I'm not concerned with her jumping ability," Willingham said. "I'm just worried about where she hits the board. Timing is so important in the long jump."

Sheila Benford is less free with her advice. As a former coach, she knows how parents sometimes can intrude upon a coach's philosophies. Yet there are times when she simply cannot help herself. Sitting in the stands, she may notice her daughter not lifting her arms high enough or shortening her stride. More often it's how Marla comes out of the blocks that prompts her mother to say a word or two.

"She still has trouble at the start," Sheila said. "But she's been running a long time, so Betty much knows what she can do."

Marla, 17, began running at an early age.

With her mother coaching at Pershing (1979-83), then at Osborn (1984-87), she didn't have much choice but to become involved. At age 6 she started running with the Motor City Track Club, coached by Betty Robinson. Her first race was the 3,200 relay and, sure enough, her team won.

"Betty needed a runner, so I said to give Marla a try," Sheila Benford said. "I remember her saying, 'Mommy, I'll get that lead.' She ran the first leg and that's exactly what she did. She got the lead for her team."

Marla has drawn interest from universities for both track and basketball. She hasn't decided between the two in college. Lewis said that although basketball is more glamorous, track is her sport.

A 3.0 student, Marla is in an accelerated academic program at King, called the Center for International Studies and Commerce.

"She's a typical teen-ager," her mother said. "She likes parties, likes to go to dances. But she knows how to hit the books. She knows that's the bottom line."