

Once a Cardinal

PattiSue Plumer's return to the Farm should be a huge boon to Stanford XC

By Brian Metzler
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PattiSue Plumer was out on Stanford's practice golf course on a recent morning, watching runners go through a workout, when déjà vu struck hard. When the warm sun started to rise over Palo Alto, Calif., it was almost as if she'd been transported by time capsule back to the mid-1980s.

"It's one of the few places on campus that looks exactly the same," says Plumer, a two-time Olympian and nine-time Stanford All-American who joined the Stanford staff as an assistant track and associate cross country coach in June. "When you're out there and the team is running repeats, nothing about that changes through the years. It's hard to explain, but it was an interesting moment for me for sure."

Plumer, 49, should have that feeling a lot this fall, now that she's in charge of guiding the Cardinal women's cross country team. She accepted the job after six successful years of coaching boys and girls track and cross country just down the road at Los Altos High School and a brief stint as an attorney before that.

"She brings so much great stuff to our team," says Stanford junior Kathy Kroeger, a two-time All-American in track. "She has done so much as an athlete and as a person, and she knows everything about what we're going through. I don't think we could ask for a better fit."

The fourth-ranked Stanford men and sixth-ranked women will get their first real test of the season at the Oct. 14 adidas Wisconsin Invitational, where a handful of the top teams are going this year in lieu of the Nike Pre-Nationals meet in Terre Haute, Ind.

When the track season ended last spring, Stanford runners knew assistant coach David Vidal would be leaving the school to pursue other ventures, but they didn't know Plumer would be joining the program. Her return to The Farm, as it's known in Stanford-speak, should be a benefit to both the Cardinal men's and women's distance programs. Jason Dunn has been the head cross country coach since he arrived in 2008, but he's the first to admit that coaching both genders at such a high level might be more than one coach can manage.

Although the Cardinal haven't won a national title under his watch, Dunn has kept the program among the nation's elite since Peter Tegen's successful but brief stint from 2005–2007. Under Dunn, the men won three Pac-10 titles and have finished fourth, 10th and third at the NCAA championships. The women, meanwhile, have fared pretty well, too, winning the 2010 Pac-10 meet and placing eighth in the nation in 2008, 16th in 2009 and 13th last year. (They might have had a top-six finish last year if No. 1 runner Kroeger hadn't suffered an injury that forced her to drop from the race.)

But at Stanford, the bar is always very high, both in the classroom and the locker room. The unwritten but oft-spoken goals for the cross country teams are to win conference titles and be able to contend for national titles every year. The men's team was ranked No. 1 in the country for much of the 2009 and 2010 seasons, but Dunn hasn't yet been able to turn the incredible depth of talent over the past few years into a championship.

The Stanford men won four national championships and nine Pac-10 titles from 1996-2007 under Vin Lananna (who has since led rival Oregon back to national prominence), Andrew Gerard and Tegen. With Dunn able to focus mostly on elevating the men's team, the hope is that Plumer can help lead the women's back to where it was from 1996-2007, when it won 12 straight Pac-10 crowns and five NCAA championships under Lananna, Dena Evans and Tegen.

Technically, both Dunn and Plumer are associate head coaches of cross country (under Edrick Floreal, the Franklin P. Johnson Director of Track and Field), but their duties will still overlap and complement one other's, especially in more broad-based tasks like scheduling, budgeting, training camps and recruiting. And that should be a benefit to each team.

"[Coaching both teams] probably got to be a little bit of a challenge, particularly given the level of expectations we have here and the level of athletes we have in our program," says Dunn, 37, who previously served as the head coach at Virginia, where he helped both the men's and women's teams reach the NCAA championships in 2005 and 2007. "I think that this situation is really going to position us to achieve those goals on the national level on both sides.

"I think a lot of our athletes aspire to be a national champion and an Olympian and PattiSue has done those things," he adds. "So I think it's really, really good to have her around for those reasons, but I also think it's good to have somebody who's going to be able to look after the women and at the same time both of us keeping our eyes on both groups."

Dunn has worked wonders on the recruiting trail, both on the men's and women's sides. That's one of the reasons the women's program should be able to soar immediately under Plumer. The women's team returns a strong nucleus in senior Stephanie Marcy (55th at nationals last year and twice an All-American at 10,000m on the track) and juniors Alex Dunne (85th at 2010 nationals) and Kroeger (2010 Pac-10 cross country runner-up). Other key returning runners include sophomore Jessica Tonn (96th at nationals last year), senior Georgia Griffin (97th at nationals last year) and Madeline Duhon (55th at Pac-10 meet, 244th at nationals).

Leading the way among the freshman class are Aisling Cuffe (the 2010 Foot Locker champion from Cornwall-on-Hudson, N.Y.), Chelsey Sveinsson (the 2008 Foot Locker runner-up from Dallas), Molly McNamara (an All-American middle-distance runner from Little Silver, N.J.) and Alli Billmeyer (a 10:18 3200m runner from Solana Beach, Calif., who finished third in the Jim Ryun Dream Mile).

Kroeger won the season-opening Stanford Invitational on Sept. 24, and was followed closely by Cuffe (second), Marcy (fifth), McNamara (eighth), Tonn (10th) and Billmeyer (16th). Having three true freshman in the mix so early should keep everyone working hard as they vie for top-seven spots at the Oct. 29 conference meet. (The conference will be tougher this year with Colorado, ranked No. 4 in the NCAA, and Utah joining the new Pac-12 Conference.)

While Plumer, known for her tenaciousness as a runner, is excited about the immediate impact the freshmen might have, she also wants to be cautious and realistic. Most of the freshmen were running considerably less than 50 miles per week in high school (and some as few as 25 or 30), so there is no way she'll have them putting in the same volume as Marcy and Kroeger, who might hit 75 miles per week. Plus, many only raced 2 miles during high school cross country, not the 6K they'll race at the end of the collegiate season.

Having coached boys and girls in high school, she's aware there are subtle difference in coaching each

gender. She wants to be sure to bring Stanford's young runners along slowly, both the highly touted runners and the aspiring walk-ons.

"You really have to be careful with freshmen, especially on the women's side," Plumer says. "You can't paint with a broader brush. They don't have the same levels of hormones and testosterone as men. You really have to be more specific and sort of thoughtful about it, otherwise you can have a high risk of injuries."

When Plumer entered college in 1980, she didn't have the outstanding race resume like some of her current athletes. But she quickly developed into one of the NCAA's top runners. She helped the Cardinal to three consecutive runner-up team finishes at the NCAA cross country championships and, on the track, won the NCAA indoor 2-mile run in 1983 (9:45.54) and the outdoor 5,000m (15:39) in 1984. She still holds the Stanford record in the indoor 3,000m (8:53.1) and mile (4:23.5), times that are still competitive more than 25 years later.

Plumer continued her development after college, breaking Mary Slaney's 5,000m American record with a 14:59.59 in 1989 and earning Olympic team berths in 1988 (13th in the 3,000m) and 1992 (fifth in the 3,000m, 10th in the 1500m). If there's one thing that she wants to convey to her runners — both the upperclassmen and the freshmen — it's that their development can and should continue many years out of college.

"You can't do everything in three months," she says. "It's a relatively short season and we're in no rush. It's easy to be focused on your very first season of cross country, but we want them to understand it's a four- or five-year development process, and for some, even beyond that."

Plumer has remained close to the Stanford program since she graduated in 1985, even serving as a volunteer assistant in 1992–93 while going to Stanford Law School. She retired from racing in 1998 and practiced employment law for several years, but could never quiet the siren call of coaching.

"I love coaching — at any level," says Plumer, who only runs occasionally. "I would have stayed at the coaching job I had, because I loved that. This was probably the only job that could have made me leave that one."

She calls her career as a Stanford undergrad "the single most important time in my life" and wants to help her current runners have the same experience. Plumer has already started to make her mark, whether it be from her insights as a former top-tier runner or by the new drills and core exercises she's implemented.

Still, she knows her job will be more than just prescribing workouts, yelling out splits and planning races. Her new gig is also about molding teenaged girls into young women with a college education. She knows first-hand how tough it is to perform at the highest level on the track and in the classroom.

"She's been-there, done-that, and we can trust that," Kroeger says. "And that's really comforting."

Despite all of the high points of her success, she had plenty of low points, too, both in college and as a post-collegiate runner, from struggling through final exams to getting hit by a taxi after a meet in Japan to suffering food poisoning during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul.

"There are times when you just don't feel like you can do it, like you just don't feel like you can be

successful, when you think it's too much," she says. "Those experiences are the same when you're studying for your first finals in law school or your first cross country race in college. There are moments when you feel overwhelmed and that you're just not going to be successful. And I think when you've mastered those emotions and fears in one venue, then you can transfer them to a different venue and be successful there as well."

Of course, a lot has changed since Plumer was donning a Cardinal racing singlet. There are more intricate rules, there is more attention being paid to form and strength, there new things that compete with a student-athlete's time and focus and there's also the regional qualifying system in outdoor track. But, as Plumer points out, it's still running and most of the training methods are time-tested without much change. Especially those mile repeats out on the golf course.