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LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

BY VINCE MOORE

If you want to chart the progress of the running program at Furman University, start with the day in 2013 that Allie Buchalski arrived on campus as an 18-year-old freshman.

She was not an overly heralded high school runner, and she may have recruited Furman harder than Furman recruited her. But she would get significantly better every year, and it’s no coincidence that the program’s rise to national prominence over the last five years has mirrored her own journey.

“We’ve accomplished a lot of firsts here, and most of them have either been through Allie or because of Allie or it is Allie,” says Paladin Head Track and Field and Cross-Country Coach Robert Gary. “She’s been the backbone of the program.”

A distance runner, Buchalski was the first recruit of Gary and his wife, Rita, an assistant coach who works with the women’s running program. They had come to Furman in 2012 from the Ohio State track and field program, and their plan was to make the Paladin distance running program one of the nation’s best.

“Allie didn’t have the best times in high school, and she hadn’t qualified for any national meets,” says Rita Gary. “But she is a true athlete and one of the greatest competitors I have ever coached, and she simply reinvented herself as a runner in college.”

It didn’t take long for the Garys to know what they had in Buchalski. By the end of her first year, she was named Southern Conference Women’s Cross-Country Freshman of the Year, and she represented the U.S. Junior National Cross-Country team in an international competition in Scotland. And this improvement came despite the unexpected death of her father during her first semester, which was a devastating blow.
Notes from the Field

“It was a very difficult time,” Buchalski says. “But all you can do is keep moving forward and hope the next day is better than the last.”

After being honored as the conference’s Cross-Country Runner of the Year her sophomore year, she became the first All-American runner in Furman women’s history over the next two seasons, with qualifying finishes in three different NCAA championship events – the 3,000 and 5,000 meter runs, as well as cross-country. She also qualified for the 5,000 at the USA Track & Field championships this past summer.

Buchalski is only the fourth woman in the history of the conference to win three league individual titles and just the sixth to be named All-SoCon first team four times. She has also earned six All-American citations, with still one more outdoor season to run in the spring of 2018.

“Allie is probably the most coachable athlete I’ve ever been around, and she surprised us all the time with what she’s been able to accomplish,” says Robert Gary. “There comes a point when you get so good that it’s hard to get better. But she has done it every year.”

While Buchalski’s personal achievements have been impressive, she’s also been willing to set aside personal goals for team ones. She was healthy and in prime running condition during the 2016 cross-country season but sat out so a group of promising freshmen could have a year to mature and be ready to compete in 2017.

The plan worked. The Furman women qualified for their first NCAA Cross-Country championship this past fall, and Buchalski’s ninth-place, All-American performance led the Paladins to a seventh-place finish, ahead of such schools as Michigan, Georgia, Penn State and Texas.

“I didn’t mind sitting out last season because I knew how good the team could be in cross-country this year,” says Buchalski, a Dean’s List student who has maintained a 3.65 GPA in business and studio arts. “I felt like a top-10 finish was possible, but for us to do that in our national tournament debut was phenomenal.”

Because Buchalski also redshirted during the outdoor season her freshman year, it allowed her to spend an additional year running at Furman. And while the Johns Creek, Georgia, native will graduate in May, her legacy will remain on campus.

The Paladin women were ranked as high as second in the Southeast during the fall cross-country season, and the top six runners who finished behind Buchalski at the NCAA championship return for at least two more seasons. The men’s team was the top-ranked program in the Southeast for much of the 2017 season and rose as high as seventh nationally. Both programs have been Southern Conference champions for the last five years.

There’s even more good news. In October, Furman alum Chris Borch ’78 and his wife, Andrea, announced they were pledging $1 million to fund the construction of the “Blue Shoes Track House” at the Irwin Belk Complex for Track and Field. The facility is expected to be completed by the end of the school year.

In many ways, the 2017-18 season for the Garys has been the Allie Buchalski Farewell Tour. They realize it’s her last year, and they have found themselves constantly telling one another that this will be the last time they’ll watch her run this race, or the last time she’ll attend that event. She has meant that much to the program.

“Allie legitimized what we were doing as coaches, and she opened the door for some special runners to come to Furman,” Rita Gary says. “She has always done her best, no matter the situation. It’s only fitting that she’s become one of the most decorated female athletes in Furman history.”

As the first All-American runner in Furman women’s history, Allie Buchalski has served as the foundation for a program that has joined the nation’s elite.