Her Blood Runs Purple

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By Jim Stewart

When it comes to Furman’s distance-running royalty, the name “Barker” arguably wears the crown. The family honor roll starts with Paul ’74 (he now goes by Chris), followed by brothers Phil ’78 and David ’80. The Barker boys brought their athletic talent and Presbyterian work ethic (Dad was a minister) to then-Baptist Furman from Indiana, where track and cross country were popular and the quality of high school competition was strong. All of their names can be found in the university’s record book.

Fast forward a few years to the next generation of Barkers, represented by Phil’s daughters, Lindsey ’09 and Erin ’12. Erin’s breakthrough year in 2011-12, combined with her lineage, provided the inspiration for this article.

But first we should mention one other contributor to the athletic gene pool. Ma Barker — Sue Houck ’79 — was a four-year member of the women’s tennis team.

To be fair, in their younger days the Barker sisters did give Mom’s game a try. “But we also had academics to worry about,” says Erin, “so we made a choice, and Dad’s sport won.” Lindsey paved the way, racing to all-county and all-region honors at Easley (S.C.) High. Erin built on that legacy and was named all-region and all-state in cross country and track before following her sister to Furman.

Erin also benefited directly from Dad’s guidance her senior year when Phil, who at the time was between jobs, volunteered to help coach the Easley squad. The team finished second in the state.

“It was actually a great thing for me personally, because I’d been working a huge number of hours before,” says Phil. “This gave me a chance to spend quality time with her. I just had to be careful to separate the Dad role from the coach role.

“Erin’s pretty self-motivated. The biggest thing I did was to help her keep the attitude up and build her confidence.”

On occasion he’d even join her during workouts, which Erin doesn’t recall so fondly. “He would beat me all the time,” she says. “It made me so mad for an old man to do that.”

Erin Barker is the latest member of her athletic family to make her mark at Furman.
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Phil and Erin both graduated from Furman with several school records. But while they finished in similar places, they took different routes to get there. Phil, who still looks as if he could knock over a quick 100 meters without breaking a sweat, was a mainstay of the strong track and cross country programs of the mid-seventies. Erin says she’s been told he was “the hardest worker on the team” — so much so that his teammates joked he would “kill his kids” if they chose to pursue a sport. He was the last Furman men’s teams to win Southern Conference titles in cross country and indoor track (both in 1976). He holds several school records in individual events and relays, and the league record he established in the outdoor 1,500-meter run still stands. 35 years later he was elected to the Furman Athletic Hall of Fame in 1982.

Erin had a somewhat rougher ride. During her first cross country season she suffered a stress injury, and her initial efforts at rehab were hesitant to go full-out. As she gained fitness and confidence, though, she improved steadily, finishing with her best time at the conference meet. She continued to improve through the indoor and outdoor track seasons.

Says Laura Caldwell, an assistant coach at Furman the last two years, who worked with the distance runners, “Erin just needed to get to the point where she could train day in and day out, without any injury breaks. She always had the discipline and the desire. What she needed was consistency.”

After a solid summer of training Erin took off in the fall of 2011, cutting her five-kilometer conference meet. She continued to improve through the indoor and outdoor track seasons.

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Take the Short Way Home

I had naively every day for a week when I reached the west bank of Maine’s Piscataquis River, and the guidebook warned that this knee-high fording could be dangerous after heavy rains.

At another crossing earlier that morning, I had foolishly chosen to wear sandals and keep my boots dry. Unable to see my feet through the dark, swirling waters, I slipped on the rocky bottom and nearly went under, but while my backside got wet, my feet through the dark, swirling waters, I slipped on the rocky bottom and nearly went under, but while my backside got wet, my feet remained dry.

Lesson learned, I kept the boots on this time, but struggled to find stable footing and force my way across the current as the icy waters fought hard to pull me downstream. Still, I progressed and whooped and savored one more moment in a half-year odyssey that was coming to an end.

But nature chose this low season, which has gotten used to Barkers running around campus over the last seven years? About where it was in 1980, when David’s graduation ended the 10-year reign of Barker boys.

Fear not. On the horizon, jogging into view, there’s Brad Barker, a high school junior.

Hmmm — who does that sound like?

I’d love to stay [at Furman]” Erin says, “but I need to get those requirements for physical therapy school, and Clemson has a program with courses geared exactly in that direction. And there are the competitive team obligations. A pro at Clemson that I ran against in high school just went to the Olympic Trials. That says something.

Given the close but nature of last year’s team, which Erin clearly treasured, her Furman buddies will likely understand her decision. And as for the probability that at some point she’ll compete against her former teammates, she doesn’t seem too concerned.

“It should be fun,” she says. “And it will be funny to see who my Dad cheers for.”

Wouldn’t this be a teachable moment for Furman, which has gotten used to Barkers running around campus over the last seven years? About where it was in 1980, when David’s graduation ended the 10-year reign of Barker boys.

After an odyssey of self-discovery along the Appalachian Trail, an alumni decides to re-enter the civilized world by hitchhiking home. Here’s his tale of the return trip.

By Jerry Adams