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Right on Track

Coach Chris Schumacher finds a winning formula to make his Titan teams among the nation's best.

Story by CHIP CORWIN '05

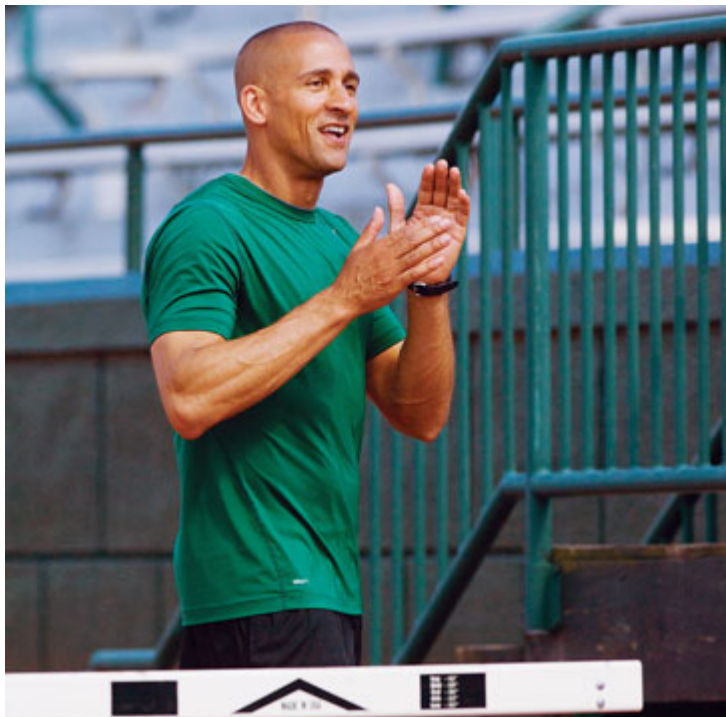
It's the conference championships and Titan senior Amanda LaRocca has just breezed to victory in the 100-meter dash. Yet her coach, Chris Schumacher, looks nervous, pacing back and forth behind the finishing line."

Schumacher — known to his student athletes and colleagues as "Coach Shoe" — is waiting for an official measurement of wind speed during the race. Finally, an official huddled in front of a tarp-protected computer screen gives a thumbs-up. The wind at LaRocca's back was not strong enough to disqualify her time of 11.98 seconds: a new Titan record and good enough to qualify her for the national championships.

"Yes!" Schumacher says, pumping his fist in the air, a bit uncharacteristic for the usually understated coach. He then scurries back to the starting line to tell LaRocca the good news.

Coach Schumacher has grown accustomed to getting and passing along good news in his 13 years as IWU's head men's and women's track coach. This May, he led the Titan women's track team to its first outright NCAA Division III outdoor track championship. The women also tied for the outdoor championship in 2008 and were national indoor champions in 2008, placing fourth in 2006, 2009 and 2010. Under Schumacher, the men's team has also placed in six national championships, while the coach himself has accumulated five Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW) coaching staff awards, five Midwest Coach of the Year awards, and two National Coach of the Year awards.

Schumacher says that all these awards and accolades "are a tribute to the athletes, staff, and University." However, those who work with him insist he deserves a lot of the credit.



Chris Schumacher has won two National Coach of the Year awards. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

“Only a fool wouldn’t work hard for Coach Shoe,” says Marchan Adkins, who served as one of the team’s assistant coaches before starting his own track meet management company last year. “Many coaches are stuck in a mindset that everyone has to adjust to their style. I have watched Shoe adjust to the talent and personalities on his squad each successive year. That’s genius.”



Schumacher cracks up Mackenzie Clemens (left) with his sample “shumor” — puns and wordplay that “can be a little painful sometimes,” she says, “but we all love it.” (Photo by Marc Featherly)

“It’s important for me to get to know the athlete individually,” Schumacher says. “Finding out what motivates the athlete is the biggest key.”

Schumacher says he first learned “an appreciation of the differences in people” from his parents, Franklin and Jenni Schumacher, a high school English teacher and nurse, respectively. As an African-American adopted into an all-white family, Schumacher was raised in a small town in northern Wisconsin. At the time his adoption was finalized, a local judge told Schumacher’s father that the town “wasn’t ready for something like this.”

“My parents were ahead of their time,” Schumacher says. “They had a deep understanding of people, of being

passionate about people, and understanding that no one person is better than any other.

“The whole foundation of my outlook on life comes from my parents.”

From the beginning, Schumacher manifested a penchant for athletics and leadership roles. “My Little League coach said, ‘You are a leader whether you know or believe it — the other kids follow you,’” Schumacher says. “That helped me want to become a coach.”

As a college student at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, Schumacher was an All-Conference and Honorable Mention All-American place-kicker and punter on the football team, and also earned three All-American citations in the triple jump. He went on to get a master’s degree at LaCrosse in 1992 and was inducted into that university’s Wall of Fame in 2006 for his successes as an athlete and coach.

In the fall of 1994, Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., offered Schumacher his first head coaching job: cross country. He would also be the assistant track coach. Schumacher had little experience with distance running, but welcomed the challenge. “I learned a whole new appreciation for that sport,” he says. “Football gets all the headlines, but there’s a certain passion in distance runners that I haven’t seen in any other sport.”

Bill Keating, now an attorney in Fargo, N.D., was a sophomore cross country runner at Concordia when Schumacher took over the program. “His interest was more than what you could do for him as an athlete,” says Keating. “He saw his position as a chance to help you grow as a well-rounded person.”

Though Schumacher left prior to Keating’s senior year to join Illinois Wesleyan’s faculty, the two stayed in touch. Keating finished second in his conference championships that year. “It was the most satisfying race of my life,” says Keating, “and it would not have happened without the continued guidance from Coach Shoe. He could have left and never said another word. Instead, he fulfilled the commitment that he made to me. It meant something to him to help me reach my goal.”

Schumacher brought that same sense of commitment as cross country and track coach at Illinois Wesleyan, along with a sense of “legitimacy” for those programs, according to Harold Gauthier ’00.

“There weren’t very high expectations of the team,” Gauthier recalls. “Once Shoe arrived, all that changed. From the beginning he made clear that success is something that can happen, and he showed us how to do it.”

“The track athletes work incredibly hard for Shoe because they know how much he cares and how hard he works for them,” adds Greg Huffaker, IWU assistant track coach and head cross country coach.



The coach gets his team fired up at practice. “Being at your best is not about championships,” he says. “It’s about investing in something greater than yourself.” (Photo by Marc Featherly)

That’s a statement to which many other current and former athletes can attest. “Coach Shoe is quite simply one of the most amazing people I have ever met,” says Gena (Rawlins) Melick ’05, who is now assistant track coach at Washington University. “He helped me through personal issues that I am sure he didn’t sign up for when I decided to attend IWU. But never did he let me down.”

Shavantay Thomas ’12 says that the pressures of college life made her unsure about going out for track this year, but Schumacher’s appreciation for her as a person helped convince her to stay. “If it’s just a coach who says, ‘I need you to get first place,’ then they won’t be there for me like Shoe was there for me,” she says. “He genuinely cares.”

“Shoe’s become a big brother for me,” Gauthier says. “I talk to my friends who went to larger schools, and they didn’t make the connections with their coach that I did.”



Team members celebrate on the winners podium. The women outscored Wisconsin-Oshkosh by one point to take the Division III national championship. (Photo by Mary Ellen Barron '08)

When the women's track team took first place in this year's outdoor national championships, the close-knit team Schumacher had fostered was evident to those around them. "The IWU cheering section was in full force and not to be out-cheered once the gun went off with points on the line," recalls Mary Ellen Barron '08, a former long-distance runner who attended the event. "Athletes and fans from other schools actually expressed their jealousy and admiration that we were able to get loud for our ladies and give them the support they deserved."

The first place win was a surprise to the team, according to senior Mackenzie Clemens. "Winning the national title was unbelievable. When we came into nationals, we did not think we would even come close. Just to pull that out and stand on the podium was incredible. It was a great feeling."

Schumacher is used to being surprised by his Titan student athletes and the high level of performance they are able to achieve. "I appreciate coaching at Illinois Wesleyan because the athletes are highly motivated," he says. "They're not paid to be here. They're passionate, and they really want to be here. That is a big deal for me."

Schumacher also cherishes the inclusive and diverse nature of Division III programs. "What I'm looking for is someone who is willing to work hard and bring something to the team, but not just in terms of athletic talent," he says. "IWU seeks multitalented students, and I think our programs exemplify that. For 13 years I've been asked, 'Don't you have aspirations to be at a big school?' But that's not my personality. I really, really appreciate this job."

That same sense of commitment is evident among his team members. "When I look back at my college career," says Clemens, "I will say, 'I ran track at IWU.' This really was the best time of my life."