



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Clark College women's cross country team, from left, Katarina Mueller, Shelby Beaudoin, Holly Meler, Briel Thoune, Angela Gula and Tamara Kulla, have made an impact from their first race of the season.

RUNNING SISTERHOOD

Clark women's cross country six set sights on NWAACC title

By PAUL DANZER
Columbian staff writer

Two-by-two-by-two.

For the women who run cross country for Clark College, those are the dimensions of a championship team.

Saturday at Clackamas Community College in Oregon City, the Penguins hope to cap a successful season with a team title at the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges championship meet.

This has already been a rewarding season for the team. Clark captured the NWAACC South Region title without top runner Holly Meler, who sat out that race because of injury. At an early-season meet in California, the Penguins placed second, finishing just seven points behind Orange Coast, the top-ranked California community college.

Those results are certainly a reflection of the talent on coach Ryan Hovde's team. But the results are about chemistry as much as they are about speed.

The team motto is "stay with your sister." With three pairs of runners posting similar times, it is more than a motto — it is the strategy.

Out front for the Penguins are Meler, a 2010 Columbia River grad, and Briel Thoune, a 26-year-old who is racing competitively for the first time. Carrying the third and fourth spots in the lineup are Tamara Kulla from La Center and Mountain View graduate Katarina Mueller. The third wave is Heritage grad Angela Gula and Prairie grad Shelby Beaudoin.

"It works out perfect," Hovde said, "We tell them, 'If you see your sister, get up on her shoulder and make sure she knows you're there.'"

That all six runners hail from Clark County makes it that much better for Hovde.

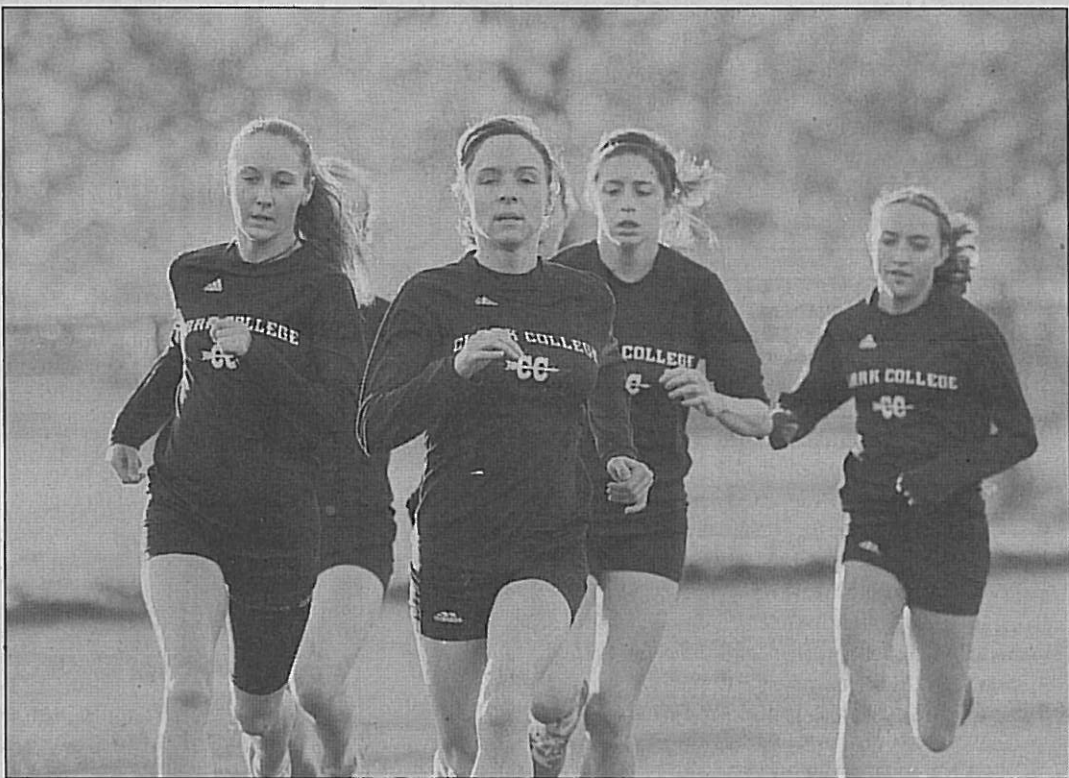
Penguins' team goal is top three

Clark College cross country coach Ryan Hovde said he hopes that both his men's and women's teams collect trophies with a top-three finish at the NWAACC Championships on Saturday at Clackamas Community College.

Both teams Clark won the Southern Region title two weeks ago.

Cameron Falker, Nathan Richards, Jaren O'Brien, Walker Riley, and Nathan Perry all finished in the top-10 as Clark ran away with the men's team title at regionals. All of the men are from Southwest Washington.

— Paul Danzer



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Holly Meler, left, and Briel Thoue, foreground center, and their Clark teammates get in their workout Wednesday. The team will be at the NWAACC Championships on Saturday in Oregon City.

Clark:

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But this tight-knit team didn't exactly form according to plan.

Thoue is perhaps the best example of the serendipity of it all.

In March, after she placed 15th among women 25-29 in the 15-kilometer Shamrock Run, she sent an e-mail to Hovde with her time (1:06:58). The coach responded with a training regimen. When Thoue improved her 5-kilometer time by several minutes, Hovde offered a scholarship.

Thoue — who had never seen a cross country race before this season — decided to go for it. She quit her job as an internet banker for a local credit union and enrolled at Clark.

"It was hard to quit my job," Thoue said, "but the adventure was very intriguing."

The season went from intriguing to exciting when Meler decided to start her college career at Clark rather than Portland State. Money

If you go

■ **What:** NWAACC Cross Country Championships

■ **When:** Saturday — Men's race (8,000 meters), 11 a.m.

Women's race (5,000 meters), noon.

■ **Where:** Clackamas Community College, Oregon City.

was the big factor in that decision, she said.

Hovde hadn't recruited Meler, but welcomed the accomplished racer to the fold and raised the expectations for his team.

Meler (18:36) and Thoue (18:58) have two of the top five times in the NWAACC this season, and all six Penguins are on the top-25 list for this NWAACC season. Mueller (19:14) has the 11th best NWAACC time. Kulla (19:19) ranks 14th.

Thoue admits to being quite nervous before races. She said she and her teammates were "blown away" by

their success at the first meet of the season — a fourth place finish at the University of Portland's West Coast Conference preview meet.

Mueller — primarily a middle distance runner on the track at Mountain View — and Kulla both credit Hovde's direction and encouragement for their quick adjustment to college-level racing.

"I didn't think I'd improve this much, this fast," Mueller said.

"(Hovde) believes in us," Kulla said. "He knows we can all run faster than we have been. He's always encouraging us."

The fact that all six Penguin women are freshmen certainly hasn't slowed down the team. That's because they are all competitors, according to Meler.

"We train like we're racing," Meler said. "We are constantly chasing after one another."

On Saturday, the Penguin women expect to compete with Spokane and Everett for the NWAACC title.

Two by two by two, they just might wind up No. 1.