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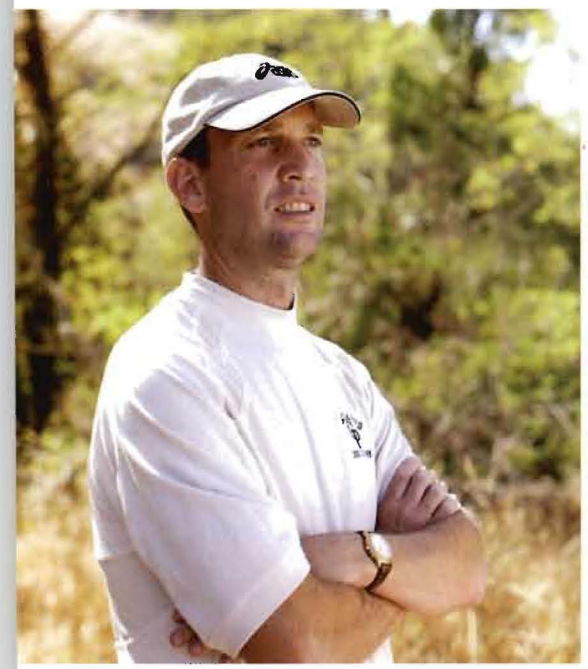

Coach Mark Conover and his cross country team

RUNNING FOR HIS LIFE

Coach Conover Turns Obstacles Into Opportunities

BY SUSAN McDONALD

Mark Conover (MCRP '89) watched intently as the tight pack of runners glided past him. They moved as a unit, matching strides on the bumpy dirt path. Beads of sweat dripped from their faces onto their bare shoulders. They were smiling.

"These are the most fantastic years of their lives," Conover mused, smiling back at them.

Before he became Cal Poly's cross country coach, Conover was a world-class distance runner. He competed in the marathon at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, where his feet bled so badly, the blood soaked clear through to his socks and shoes. Later, he raced professionally for Reebok. But, he said, it's the confidence and self-esteem the sport has given him – not the fame – that means the most.

"Running is about perseverance. It teaches a lot about handling anything that comes your way. I learned that when I had cancer."

About 10 years ago, when Conover was in his mid-30s, he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. He was training for the 1992 Olympic trials and kept getting sick. He placed 10th – only the top three make the team – and stayed home.

"I was wheezing a lot," he recalled. "When a doctor examined me and found a lump in my clavicle, I was almost relieved."

He endured six months of chemotherapy, but kept running. "Even on the worst days, after chemo, I would jog. I'd get out in the sun and the wind. I had to get off the couch and away from the self-pity."

He also set a goal – to try for the 1996 Olympics. At the trials in Minnesota, he ran his slowest time ever and finished 71st. "It was my most meaningful race, after what I'd been through. Running is my best friend. Not until I got cancer did I realize what it did for me."

Today he is cancer-free and inspiring Cal Poly runners to chase their own dreams. The men's cross country team has won the Big West Conference title five of the last seven years. Last year, the team finished 10th in the nation. "We have a team of smart, committed athletes who really want to be at Cal Poly," Conover said.

Civil engineering major Andy Coughlin, a senior with a straight-A grade point average, is a prime example. He came from Laramie, Wyo. Last year, he was named both the Big West and Cal Poly student athlete of the year.

Coach Conover has been at Cal Poly since 1996. He also coaches the women's cross country team and the distance runners on the track team. "I hope all these people keep running the rest of their lives," said Conover, who figures he has covered more than 100,000 miles and continues to run daily.

"Every year, I have someone who excels in spite of challenges. Sometimes they don't make the travel roster the first year. But they stick with it and come back the next year, and they make it. They find a way to be successful. This is a 'find-a-way' sport." ■