Catching Up With ... Megan Trotter

At each SD State Track and Field meet, a Gold Medal award is given to the athlete that has the best time/mark in each event amongst the three classes – AA, A and B. Megan Trotter, who competed for Rapid City Central from 1999 to 2003, has the distinction of having the most Gold Medal awards in state history at eleven.

From an inauspicious start to her career as a third grader in a Hershey track and field meet where Megan's mother said she ran in all eight lanes competing in the 400M Dash, to being named one of the Rapid City Journal's Top Ten Greatest Athletic Figures of all time in 2014 to her 2024 induction into the Rapid City Central Hall of Fame, she left a lasting mark on the sport of track and field in South Dakota.

Megan was born in Rapid City, but her early years were spent in Edgemont where her parents and grandparents ran a family hardware store. She was the younger of two girls, her sister Erin being five years older. She was greatly influenced by her parents and grandparents, partly through sports. Her father was the high school boys' basketball coach and took his two girls to practice where they absorbed enough to both become competitive players. She credits her grandmother with teaching her how to throw a fast ball, telling her not to throw a "wimpy pitch". At her induction into the Cobbler Hall of Fame, one of her high school track coaches, John Houska, told her, "Your sister and parents are the real MVP's. They were the foundation that your success was built upon."

In 1993, the family moved back to Rapid City where the adjustment to a big city was eased by sports. Her Dad signed her up for "Y" basketball as a third grader where he, along with her future track coach, Dave Dolan, coached her team. She prided herself on defense and recalls an opponent once saying, "I can't do anything – she's guarding me like a hot dog in a bun!" Her father also coached her in softball. The two had a special sign when it was time to steal a base. "I never had an amazing swing, but there wasn't a base I couldn't steal."

Her first brush with 'a big-time meet' came in 1997. Dolan signed up Megan and some of her Y teammates to work at the state track meet in Rapid City. She would serve as a 'runner' taking results to the PA booth. As a twelve-year-old, she said the high school runners seemed like professional athletes. "I knew that someday, I wanted to run at the state meet". At that State Meet, and at the Howard Wood Dakota Relays earlier that year, she got her first glimpse of Mitchell's Jill Theeler. One of the all-time greats made a lasting impression on Megan. After getting Theeler's autograph she said, "I remember thinking, I hope I can have just one race like hers someday."

Participation in the Hershey track program gave her a chance to experience state-wide competition while participating in the Hershey state meet in Sioux Falls where Megan competed against some future stars of the sport. "One year I ran against Steph Gebhardt of Elkton in the 200M and Heidi Muellenburg of Redfield in the 100M. I came in second to both of them and never made it to the national meet." Interestingly, the three of them would meet again in 2003 in the Howard Wood Dakota Relays Special Event 200M Dash. This time, Trotter would come out victorious.

In 1997, before the All-City track meet, her future coaches Dolan and Houska approached Megan and said they wanted her to run the 100M dash. She protested, “Coach, I run the 400 and high jump.” She was a two-time all-city champ in both events. She obliged and ran the 100 and finished dead last. She said, “Coach, I don’t think that’s my race.” Houska forcefully patted her on the back and said, “It is now.”

Shortly after, Megan’s middle school coach Jared Vasquez and her parents told her that she would be running for Rapid City Central as an eighth grader. “I never could have imagined that in less than a year after my last place finish on that football field, that I would be in the final of the 100M Dash and finish 6th place at the State Meet, while wearing a Central Cobbler uniform. Coach Houska had a vision and great ability to see your potential, even when you couldn’t fathom it.” Megan also earned her first Gold Medal that year, as part of the Cobbler’s 4x200M relay squad. She ran with three seniors on that unit, and admitted it took some time to earn their respect. “There were a lot of expectations for that team, and I wasn’t going to be the reason we didn’t win.” The squad broke the state meet and RCC school records. “Afterwards those three girls embraced me, and it wasn’t until then that I had truly earned my spot.”

That first state title would open up the floodgates to a decorated career: thirteen class AA state titles in individual and relay events, an all-time state record (100M dash in 2003), four state meet records, three school records and of course the eleven Gold Medal awards. She was named the AA Outstanding Female Athlete in 2002 and 2003 and was a three-time Howard Wood 100M champ. Megan also won the Wood special event 200M in 2003. She still ranks No. 4 in the 100M dash on the SD Top Ten list. Her 2002 4x200M squad ranks eighth and her 2003 4x100M squad ranks ninth.

Megan’s eleven gold medals included four individual events and seven relays. She is quick to give credit to others, however. “The all-time gold medal award has never belonged to me. My name holds the spot because there is not enough room for the countless individuals who are responsible for my success.”

In five years of varsity competition and almost too many races to count, one stands out for Trotter – the 2003 Howard Wood Special Event 200M dash where she would meet again with two competitors from her Hershey youth days – Steph Gebhardt and Heidi Muellenburg, both state champions in their respective classes. “As seniors, I think the three of us all felt the gravity of that moment, knowing that there would never be another chance for us to meet again on the track.” After a bus ride across the state that included a stop at a rest area so she could stretch where she was encouraged by athletes from cross-town rivals Rapid City Stevens who were following in their bus, she made a quick stop at the team hotel in Sioux Falls. When she came out of her room, her Cobbler teammates were lining the hallway cheering her on. “All of these years later, I can now admit that I had never been so nervous before a race. At one point, I even pinned my number upside down on my jersey. It felt more

monumental than a State Title, as this would be a title amongst all classes and various states, and I had only one chance." She recalls the race, "The nine of us (alternate included) were corralled for a time under the concrete bleachers of the stadium. No words or pleasantries were spoken amongst any of us, you could cut the tension with a knife. Slowly we filed onto the field. Once by one, each of us was introduced and our accolades read aloud. It took everything I had to hold back my tears when they introduced me as the daughter of Grant and Christine Trotter. I quickly pulled it together and jogged to the starting line. As we all settled in the blocks and waited for the gun to go off, it went silent. It felt like a lifetime waiting for the gun. When the gun finally sounded, we all jumped out of the blocks. I knew that I wouldn't lead for the first 50 meters. I felt really good coming off the turn and managed to edge a lead. But I could never pull away. Steph Gebhardt matched me step for step. All of a sudden, the sound came back on, you could hear the roar of the crowd and the announcer commenting on each step. It was neck and neck until the finish line. At first, I wasn't sure who won. Steph and I looked at each other with a sense of relief. We congratulated each other and then went our separate ways, waiting for the winner to be announced. I narrowly edged out Steph for a win. I remember thinking that it was not a record-breaking time or even one of our best performances, but the two us had just become part of Howard Wood history."

Trotter always counted Howard Wood as her favorite track on which to compete. "Getting the chance to run at Howard Wood (Relays) always felt bigger than even the State Track Meet. When you walk into the stadium, you can almost feel the history behind it, its sheer magnitude demands reverence for all the athletes that have come before you. Spectators come from across the state to fill the stadium. My best and most memorable performances were always on the Howard Wood Track. It is the Track Capital of South Dakota, our small version of Hayward Field."

Megan counts her dad as her first and most influential coach. "He taught me that sports are a vehicle to learning the tools necessary to make it through life. He taught me that the value of sports is not in winning but having the courage to put it all on the line and being brave enough to fail. Before every race, he would tell me, "Godspeed, kid."" She also gives high praise to Jared Vasquez, her middle school coach for his long-term encouragement; Dave Dolan, her high school coach who could calm her during tense competition and John Houska, who, she says, was never in the business of creating elite athletes but creating elite individuals.

Following her graduation in 2003, she was recruited by Tom Flood at Colorado State University. Her father passed away during her freshman year and she elected not to continue competing. Trotter has degrees from CSU and South Dakota State University. She is a Master's prepared nurse for the Veteran's Administration and works to bring telehealth to veterans in remote areas. She resides in the Black Hills with her eight-year-old daughter Vada.

Megan Trotter at her 2024 induction into the Rapid City Central Hall of Fame