

New York Times June 14, 2008

An Author Underwrites a Successful Track Program

By ANNA KATHERINE CLEMMONS

Correction Appended

NEW BERN, N.C. — At the convergence of the Trent and Neuse Rivers in the wetlands of eastern North Carolina sits this town of 29,000 people. It has been around for nearly 300 years, but has never had a reputation as a breeding ground for professional athletes. One of its proudest athletic achievements came last year, when the New Bern Bears defeated Charlotte Independence for the Class 4A high school state football championship, after which the town threw a parade.

Entering New Bern on Highway 70, drivers pass a 60-foot-by-80-foot replica of the town seal set into the ground. Recently, a small sign stood next to the seal reading “N.B.H.S. #1” with the silhouette of an athlete — a track runner. That is because New Bern is home to an emergent track program that has won five of the last six state indoor and outdoor titles and has a nearly \$1 million track and field facility to call home.

This dynasty-come-lately owes much of its success to an

unlikely benefactor: Nicholas Sparks, who has achieved international fame by writing romance novels often set in this idyllic town.

The best-selling author of books like “Message in a Bottle” and “A Walk to Remember,” Sparks first moved here with his wife, Cathy, in 1992. Working as a pharmaceutical salesman, he wrote his first best seller, “The Notebook,” at age 28. It was based on the love story between his wife’s grandparents. New Bern was the setting.

Since then, he has written 12 more books, with his next, “The Lucky One,” scheduled for release this fall. After each release, he holds a book signing at Waldenbooks inside the nearby Twin Rivers Mall. Residents say the line stretches more than 400 yards, and Sparks signs from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Despite his worldwide popularity, he always begins his book tours here, even allowing the local newspaper an early preview of each novel.

Before he was a well-known writer, Sparks was a runner. He competed for his high school in Fair Oaks, Calif., and earned a track scholarship to Notre Dame. In his freshman year, he was on the 4x800-meter relay team, which set a university record that still stands.

In recent years, Sparks returned to the sport as a coach. When Miles, the eldest of Sparks’s five children, took up

running in seventh grade, Sparks decided to train his son. But he did not want Miles to train alone, so he recruited two of Miles's classmates, the twins Anthony and Andrew Hendrix, self-described troublemakers who played football, to take up running.

"If we hadn't met Mr. Sparks, we'd probably be locked up right now," Anthony said.

When Miles was in eighth grade, Sparks became an assistant coach for the high school team, working alongside Dave Simpson, the head coach.

In 2006, the Bears' track and field team won its first state championship. Since then, the Bears have claimed five of six state titles. At the Nike Nationals in March, the Bears won the 4x800 and sprint medley relays and placed second in the 4x200 and the 4x400, the most dominating performance by a male relay team in Nike Nationals history. The Bears will try to improve on that finish June 19 at the Nike Outdoor Nationals in Greensboro, N.C.

Many team members live in New Bern's low-income housing district and say that the track team, and their coaches, have rescued them from drugs and violence.

"Every other day one of them is coming to us with something going on in their life, like, 'My father just beat me up and

threw me out of the house and I don't know where to sleep,'” Sparks said.

Sparks is building a 12,000-plus-square-foot home on the banks of the Trent. He said the home was designed not just for his family, but for the team. The family has lived in a rental house since October.

On a typical evening, Cathy lays out chicken fingers and potato chips while team members watch TV or hang out by the backyard pool. The athletes are encouraged to finish their homework. Tutors sometimes stop by the house.

“Will it do any good in the long run?” Sparks said. “I don't know, but we're trying our best. I think most of them will succeed because we work very hard to remind them of what's important.”

Darryl Reynolds, now a sophomore at Eastern Carolina University, was on New Bern's track team from 2002 to 2006. He earned a football scholarship, and was also offered one in track. He credits Sparks for his success.

“Without Coach Sparks, I wouldn't be here,” Reynolds said. “In times I've needed help, they were there. If you didn't feel like going home to your house, you're always welcome at the Sparkses'. I still talk to him almost every day.”

When Sparks began coaching, the high school's track was an

“asphalt pothole that gave kids shin splints after one lap,” he said. So he donated nearly \$900,000 to Craven County toward building a new track, which was completed in 2005. Of the eight runners who have graduated since the track was built, six have earned college track scholarships (besides the one in football).

“We were sitting at Nike Nationals and he said to me, ‘We’ve earned seven scholarships for our kids already, so that track is paying for itself,’ ” Simpson said of Sparks.

The sophomore Fuquawn Greene, a former football player, said the track program at New Bern was all-consuming.

“On the weekends, I don’t have free time,” he said. “My job is track. This is my life.”

When asked about aspirations, Greene mentioned running in college, the Olympics and an endorsement deal with Nike.

High school teams are prohibited from traveling out of North Carolina during the season, so when New Bern’s athletes leave the state for competitions from December through May, they compete as a club team, Track Eastern Carolina. Once the high school season ends in June, Track EC is not limited to New Bern athletes. Some of the top athletes in the state join the program.

The one requirement: “You can’t be pretty fast, you got to be

fast,” Sparks said.

“Usually for these athletes, they have to pay their own way — travel, hotel, food, etc., and four or five meets could be up to \$10,000,” he added. “Our club team is fully sponsored by me.”

Simpson, 45, has been New Bern’s head track coach since 1983. When discussing the opportunities afforded to the runners since Sparks joined the staff, he began to shed tears.

“You have to excuse me, but what he’s done for these kids,” Simpson said before pausing.

“When you come home and your wife is reading his book and talking about how beautiful and sexy he is, he can become one of the most disliked men in our community,” Simpson said. “But I constantly tell people, you should get to know him. Because Nick Sparks is one great man.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 18, 2008 An article on Saturday about the author Nicholas Sparks’s support of a scholastic track program in New Bern, N.C., where he lives, misstated the name of the California town where he ran track in high school. It is Fair Oaks, not Long Oaks.

Comment [s1]: