

Sports

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Fond farewell Hawk runner excels in prep finale

By Dan O'Meara
staff writer

Farewells are seldom as perfect, complete and fulfilling as the one Farmington Hills Harrison senior Chad Burgess enjoyed Thursday afternoon.

It was pure storybook stuff when Burgess, a three-sport star who has a lingering knee problem, ended his high school career prematurely in the annual city track and field meet at North Farmington.

In his prep finale, Burgess won the 800- and 400-meter runs and anchored the winning 3,200 and 1,600 relays teams while leading the Hawks to their third straight championship.

Farmington's girls team also captured its third straight title with little difficulty. The Falcons had superb efforts from a number of people and ran away with the crown, beating runner-up Harrison by 55 points.

The latest triumph for the Harrison boys was a going-away present to Burgess from his teammates.

"WE BROUGHT that out last night at practice, and we said if it was (his last meet) we wanted to give this to him as a gift," Harrison coach John Schumacher said. "We dedicated the meet to him."

Burgess, whom his teammates hoisted onto their shoulders and tossed into the air afterward, has "fatigue knee," which only rest can

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— Chad Burgess
Harrison track star

cure apparently. Burgess, who made the All-Observers teams in football and basketball, said his doctor told him he needs to rest the knee for a period of several months.

Burgess plans to continue in athletics at the collegiate level next fall, however. He is still undecided but could play football at Ferris State, basketball at Grand Valley or all three sports at Albion.

"I thought it was kinda neat to win the 800, because I've always been beaten by great runners like Al Stebbins and Brandon London at Farmington," Burgess said. "To win all four of my races is a great feeling."

Schumacher remains hopeful that Burgess will be able to continue, however. The Hawks achieved another city title with a much younger team than they had last year, and a veteran athlete like Burgess is crucial to any additional success Harrison

hopes to have this spring.

"He has that fatigue knee, and any meet could be his last," Schumacher said. "His doctor tells him it's a matter of pain — how much he can endure."

"IT WOULD hurt the team a lot. He's got a lot of ability, and he's a great athlete."

The Hawks, who swept first place in the relays, also had key contributions from Bobb Beauchamp, Dave Foss, Jeff Barringer, Cabe Morphew, Will Matthews, Joe George and Jake Murdock.

Beauchamp and Morphew were double winners in individual events, too. Beauchamp won the 100 and 200 dashes, and Morphew was first in both hurdles races.

In addition to Burgess, Beauchamp and Morphew, Matthews, George, Chris Bucalos, Murdock,

Foss, Barringer and John, Berry were on one or more of the relay teams.

"What was important about this meet is that we had some young people come through," Schumacher said. "We've got so many young kids, and we're going to have to rely on them. I've got 47 kids out who've never been out for track."

Farmington dominated the girls meet, winning 11 of the 16 events, including the sprint relays. Coach Bruce Brown hopes the convincing victory is a harbinger of things to come.

"WE'RE STILL going to have some tough meets, but it should give the girls a lot of enthusiasm for the season coming up," he said.

The Falcons weren't short of stars entering the meet, and the competition produced yet another one — senior Jennifer Reed, a transfer from Massachusetts. Reed won both sprints and the long jump, and she was on the winning 400 relay team.

"I'd say she helped us quite a bit," Brown said, adding Reed's arrival was well timed. She has filled a void on the relay team created by the graduating Jo Fox.

"I figured she was pretty good, but I didn't know she was that good," Brown said. "She's a quiet and unassuming person. I asked her what she had done previously, and she gave me some times. I figured she was

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RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Chad Burgess raises his arms in victory as he crosses the finish line at the conclusion of the 3,200-meter relay. It was the last track meet for the Harrison star.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Mark Messner, an All-American defensive tackle at the University of Michigan, spoke to students at Longacre Elementary School about

his football career and the dangers of drug and steroid use. Messner is a former all-star at Redford Catholic Central.

Messner: Don't let dope spoil potential

By Casey Hans
staff writer

Success is what has driven the life and career of defensive lineman Mark Messner, who recently graduated from the University of Michigan after an All-American football career and is anxiously awaiting Sunday's NFL draft.

"That was always my main goal — to be successful," Messner told a group of fourth graders at Longacre Elementary in Farmington Hills last week.

The former Redford Catholic Central star visited the class after corresponding with student Garrett Ogilvie for a school assignment. He talked about his college football days, his life, his attitudes and the dangers of drug use.

"The good feelings you have when you succeed and win last longer and feel better than any drug," he said.

Messner, who has played for U-M in two Rose Bowl games and was a member of last season's winning team, said he hopes to play professionally for the Detroit Lions — the hometown team he calls "Numero Uno" — where he could be part of a comeback.

"YOU'RE GOING to ride them on the way to success," he explained. "If I go to the Lions and they start doing very well, I get to ride that emotion."

'Drugs in athletics is becoming a terrible problem. Every drug affects your brain. It kills brain cells. It doesn't heal. It never changes. If you try (drugs), you'll never be the best you can be. You'll never reach your goal.'

— Mark Messner
U-M football All-American

But Messner would be just as happy playing for three of his favorite teams — Los Angeles, Miami or Seattle.

Messner started his love affair with football as a sixth grader, and it just grew from there. The only football injury he ever sustained was a broken collarbone in high school. He had no special desire to play football for Michigan, but attended college in Ann Arbor so he could be close to home and family.

"Until I got to Michigan, I wasn't a diehard fan," he said. "But once you get to Michigan, your blood turns blue."

His choice was Michigan's gain, as he ended his career leading the Wolverines in tackles and taking with him good memories of his college career and Michigan athletic director and head coach, Bo Schembechler.

"I loved to play for Bo," he said. "If I could bring Bo with me, I would. He makes you the best player and the best person you can be. That's why Michigan is so good. He demands perfection."

THROUGH HIS four-year career, Messner said he tried "to talk with young people . . . and lead by example."

"Hard work and setting goals — that's what each and every one of you has to do," he told the students. "Set it very high. That's how you become the best. I set a goal to be an All-American."

Messner encourages youngsters to stay away from all drugs, including steroids, which are popular for muscle building with some athletes. He stressed, however, there "are still more good athletes than bad."

"Drugs in athletics is becoming a terrible problem," he said. "Every drug affects your brain. It kills brain cells. It doesn't heal. It never changes. If you try (drugs), you'll never be the best you can be. You'll never reach your goal," he added.

Canton brooms boys basketball coach

By Dan O'Meara
staff writer

Tom Niemi was fired as Plymouth Canton boys varsity basketball coach last week, because the school district wants a coach who also works in the building.

Niemi, who coached the Chiefs for the last four years, teaches history at Belleville High School. He was unavailable for comment Friday.

Niemi was informed of the decision Thursday during a meeting with Canton Principal Tom Tattan and Athletic Director Paul Cummings. The Observer also was unable to reach Tattan for his comments last week, but Cummings, in a prepared statement released Friday, said:

"We have appreciated the effort shown by Tom Niemi during his four years as our head basketball coach at Plymouth Canton High School. However, we believe a change in the basketball position is in order. "Mr. Niemi was employed only for the coaching position. He was not a

full-time employee in the district. We are seeking someone who can be more directly involved with the district and district activities."

CANTON WAS 11-10 last season, but the Chiefs had won back-to-back titles in the Western Division of the Western Lakes Activities Association the two previous years. Canton was 19-5 and won the school's first district championship in 1987-88.

"Tom's record speaks for itself," Cummings said, adding he was pleased with Niemi's coaching performance and felt no animosity toward him. He said he would do whatever he could to help Niemi find another coaching job.

"As far as we're concerned at the present time, (the press release) says it right there," he added. "Somebody in the community might not know he wasn't a teacher. I didn't want anyone to think we were releasing him from two positions."

Cummings said the action was not the result of player, parental or staff



complaints about Niemi personally or in terms of his coaching. He said the decision to fire Niemi was prompted solely by the desire to have a coach in the high school building.

"That's why I don't think you want to make anything more of it than there is," Cummings said.

"It's important for the coach to see the players in the hallways as well as on the court or field. I just feel the educational process is complete in that regard, and I wish we could do it in all of our 102 coaching positions."

NIEMI WASN'T the only coach who taught or worked outside of the building and coached a Canton or Salem athletic team. Don Smith and Ken Johnson coach the boys and

girls soccer teams at Canton and Salem, respectively — four high-profile programs.

Smith teaches at Campers Elementary School in Detroit, and Johnson works for Detroit Diesel Corp. There are no plans to remove them from their coaching positions.

Cummings said it was a matter of evaluation in Niemi's case and declined to comment further on that aspect.

"I'm not trying to be evasive," he said. "From the standpoint of the school district right now, this is the direction we're going to go."

Cummings said he plans to post the job immediately within the school district for the required 10-day period. Cummings said he hopes to have someone within the district apply but has no specific candidate in mind.

"I tell you that after 10 or 11 days," he said. "There are a lot of basketball coaches in the system." If the school can't find a coach

from among its current staff, it will be in the same position as it was with Niemi. The district won't have a teaching position to offer a coach from outside the district since it recently gave pink slips to more than 100 teachers, according to Cummings.

"I WON'T know the answer to that until after I post the job," he said.

Cummings must also resolve the uncertainty surrounding the Canton girls basketball position.

Girls coach Rob Neu told the Observer in January he would not be back to coach because there was no teaching job for him and he had an offer to go into business with his father. But he has yet to submit an official letter of resignation to Cummings.

Cummings said Niemi's firing and resulting vacancy in the boys program was not related to Niemi's apparent vacillation and his unresolved status.



Tom Niemi coached Chiefs four years