

Disabled find coach and friend in Stevens

By Sean Kearns

Lisa Doyle had all but given up searching for a coach to help her daughter, Jessie, a track athlete with cerebral palsy. It's usually hard to find good individual coaches for CP track athletes. Normally, parents or special education workers take on the task, offering more encouragement than expertise.

A friend suggested Doyle call Torrey Pines High School. She reached Mike Stevens, then the head boys track coach as well as the sprint coach.

Realistically, Stevens, 27, should have been another false start. The closest contact he had to cerebral palsy was two paragraphs in a human physiology textbook. But he took the job as another coaching challenge.

"I don't see this as being different from working with any other athlete," said Stevens, who was just named sprint coach at UC San Diego. "You treat somebody with respect and dignity and they will show the same toward you. They'll perform to the best of their ability."

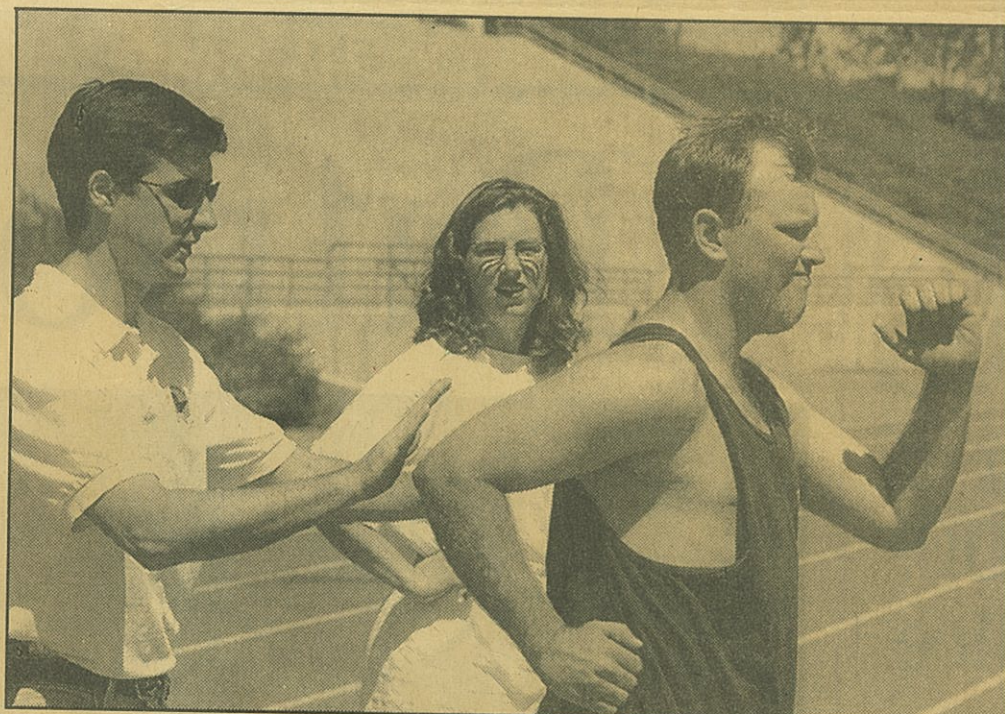
Cerebral palsy is a central nervous system disorder developed before or during birth and results in defective motor ability. But Stevens is quick to explain that his CP runners, who compete at the Paralympic level, are elite athletes. This year he brought Jessie to a practice with the Torrey Pines team. He thought about threatening bodily harm if they made fun of her stride or speech.

On the advice of a friend, he introduced her as a world class athlete who has traveled around the globe competing. The roughly 100 athletes at the practice broke into applause.

"He's the one person besides my family who treats me as a normal person and not someone with below average intelligence," Doyle, 21, said. "Almost instantly, he was beyond that."

Over their three years together, Doyle and Stevens have become friends. Except for the first three months, when he was paid, he has worked with CP athletes on a voluntary basis. This season Stevens added the head coaching duties of the United Cerebral Palsy track team, the San Diego Bullets, to his workload.

"He really cares about his athletes," said Kendall Harmon, a discus thrower on the team. "He's the kind of coach that wants a full commitment from you and he'll give that



TONY DOUBEK / Union-Tribune

Mentor: Track coach Mike Stevens works on arm movement with runner Tom Page, who has cerebral palsy. Looking on is teammate Jessie Page.

back to you, the athlete."

With his CP athletes, Stevens has become a little more than a coach. This month Tom Page, a runner and thrower, celebrated his 21st birthday. He invited Stevens to the party. Always the coach, Stevens gave Page a new football. Page throws a football to warm up for the javelin.

In July, Stevens took four athletes to England to participate in the World Cerebral Palsy Games. Harmon (discus) and 800 runner Justin Brown took home bronze medals. Page set personal records in his four events.

Doyle, hampered by a sore knee, literally dived across the finish line in the 200. She didn't win gold. She just didn't want to finish in last place.

Like many CP athletes, Doyle struggles to control her limbs. Even so, Stevens often puts his CP athletes through more difficult workouts than his high school runners. The CP athletes are typically in their 20s and their bodies are developed enough to handle the load.

He says his goal is to make his athletes work so hard that they throw up.

"You know you're a success as a coach when they're over at the side of the track, just puking," he said.

Stevens hasn't been able to achieve that goal with Doyle, but he's sure tried. Here's a sample early to midseason workout for Doyle:

Doyle does four 200s; four 150s and four 100s. Everything is done in sets of two at 90 percent with a jog back to the start line. He gives her three minutes of rest between sets. When Doyle changes distances, there's a five-minute break.

Then after a five-to-10-minute break, he has her do form drills that include walking with high knees and doing arm swings.

These drills are key for CP athletes be-

cause the muscle spasms associated with the disability make it difficult to keep good running form.

"Every athlete has limits," Stevens said. "As a coach you find out what those limits are and then you work around them. Essentially, what a coach does is train muscle memory, and that's doing the same thing over and over."

Through his CP athletes, Stevens has learned the importance of breaking down and perfecting form with his able-bodied runners, instead of allowing them to go it alone.

That patience is part of what impressed UCSD track coach Ted VanArsdale enough to search out Stevens for the sprint coach opening.

"For two years I watched him work with physically challenged individuals and help them achieve," VanArsdale said. "It's a tremendous display of patience and a giving attitude. If a person can help a physically challenged person, then they have the tools, desire, intelligence and capacity to do it at the collegiate level."

But unlike many college coaches, Stevens, a graduate of UCSD, didn't compete at that level. After finishing high school at Torrey Pines, he had the ability to run in college but stopped because he didn't think he was good enough. Looking back, he felt nobody was there to give him the belief that he could continue. Today, he coaches to give all his athletes that hope.

"Coaching is my passion," Stevens said. "Everything I do in my life is so I can coach. I can go to work with disabled athletes and I'm in an atrociously bad mood. The second I get down there, they have me laughing. That's why I enjoy working with them the most."

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