

Two Coaches, Different Paths

BY EMILY OVERCARSH | PHOTOS BY WALTER PINION

Two men could not have come to coaching from more different paths. Maynard H. Jackson High School varsity women's track coach Russell Thomas has been in physical education his entire career, calling it a "family business." North Atlanta High School community coach George Sanderlin signed up after a lifetime of love for running led him to coaching, saying it was "the only thing I hadn't done in track and field."

Despite their drastically different stories, both coaches now share the same goal: Not necessarily winning, they both say, but helping their athletes obtain college scholarships and brighter futures. They were both honored with Coach of the Year Awards in 2014—Sanderlin receiving the Judo Brown Outstanding Men's Coach Dedication Award and Thomas the Hawthorne Wesley Outstanding Women's Coach Dedication Award—presented at the annual Atlanta Track Club All-Metro Track and Field Awards Banquet in May.

Judo Brown Outstanding Men's Coach Dedication Award George Sanderlin North Atlanta High School

Sanderlin would tell you that he first fell in love with track and field when he was 12 years old, but it wasn't until after nearly four decades of running that he signed up to coach. "I had done really every aspect of track," Sanderlin says. He ran competitively in high school at Centre College in Kentucky, and after graduation he reported on meets for school newspapers and *Track & Field News*, in addition to being a lifelong spectator.

Sanderlin also joined the Atlanta Track Club Masters' competitive team in 2005 and became an official in 2008. "I just thought, 'Well, I have that kind of knowledge. I should put it to use, see if I would like being a coach,'" he says. So Sanderlin began asking around. He

kept hearing the same thing—that the team at North Atlanta High could use a hand. "It was kind of like at the end of 'Gone with the Wind,' when Scarlett is sitting there and has this voice in her head saying 'Tara, Tara, Tara,'" he recalls. "It was like, 'North Atlanta, North Atlanta, North Atlanta.'"

Sanderlin, a USA Track & Field Certified Level II coach, has now been a community coach at North Atlanta for the cross country and track and field teams for five years. Since 2010, he has coached 38 school record holders. This past fall, both the men's and women's cross country teams won the Atlanta Public Schools City Cross Country Championships for the first time in school history, and the women finished sixth at state. In spring, the men's track and field team finished 14th at state, and Class AAAAA pole vaulter John Rudd became the third male athlete in school history to win a state track title.

Sanderlin sees not only his decades of past experience on the track but his current experience as a competitive runner for the Atlanta Track Club as invaluable to his coaching. "It makes me more aware of the details," he says, "because in my mind, I'm in their shoes."

Sanderlin's main goal at North Atlanta is to put the "pep" back into the sport. "My challenge is to win students over from ball sports, which is an extremely difficult challenge," he adds.

Working with head coach Tiffany Grant and the other four community coaches, Sanderlin has helped give the teams new energy, from getting the school band and cheerleaders to come to the district championship cross country meets to teaming with the school's Robotics Club to use robotic vehicles to retrieve discs at a regional track and field competition this past spring. And the teams have grown. "We've had a lot of success in the last

few years," he says, "which multiplies on itself. Students enjoy it and tell other potential athletes, and it just kind of snowballs."

Rising North Atlanta High junior Glenda Tutt is an athlete on both the cross country and track teams. She holds four school records, is a two-time state meet scorer in cross country and made it to state sectionals in track this past spring. Tutt had never run before freshman year but met Sanderlin at that time since he coached cross country. "He's definitely grown me a lot," she says.

Sanderlin says his transition to coaching also felt a little like a transition to parenting. "Since I don't have any children myself, I look at all my student athletes as my kids," he says. Tutt adds, "He's always there for us. Anything we need he will personally go get it. He tries to make running fun, because you know, not everybody thinks running is cool."

While Sanderlin's efforts to reener-

gize running sports are the most visible, he says it's not the end goal. "We're really using track and cross country as a conduit to help athletes get into the college of their choice," he says. This year, three track athletes advanced to the collegiate level.

Whether through games during practice, special events during meets, or college scholarships, Sanderlin's ultimate mission is to make running for these students what it has been for him: A lifelong love. "I point to sports like soccer and lacrosse, and I say, 'Look at me. You won't see people my age playing sports like that,'" he says. "I tell my kids this is a sport for life."

Hawthorne Wesley Outstanding Women's Coach Dedication Award Russell Thomas Maynard H. Jackson High School

Thomas has always coached. "You could say it's a family business," he says. "My mother was a PE teacher

and coached for 40 years." He holds a bachelor's degree in physical education and a master's in higher education administration/sports-recreational administration. As basketball player himself throughout high school, when Thomas first came to Maynard H. Jackson High School, he coached basketball and track, but after three years, he dropped basketball to focus fully on the women's varsity track team that he's been working with now for a decade. "[The team] has gotten better every year," he says. "This was our best by far, actually the best year in school history."

This past season brought the team multiple school firsts—region champions and APS City Champions; the team had 10 state qualifiers for two consecutive years; and there were four top-10 ranked athletes on the team. "It's taken baby steps," Thomas says. "When I first inherited the team, we only had four girls." Thomas adds that this year the team is around 20 athletes strong, the most he's ever had. "It's catching on," he says. "They're coming."

Cortney Jones has only run on Thomas' team for one year, yet she was one of four women from the team who went to state this spring, and she received two titles as a freshman. "It's hard work," she says of being on the team. "It's intense." Since the school doesn't have a JV team, Thomas said that when the girls come in as freshman, "I pretty much throw you in the fire."

Rising Maynard H. Jackson High senior Symone Sampson, who has gone to state the past two seasons, echoes Jones' sentiment. "The best thing we got from [Thomas] is that putting in work actually gets you somewhere," she says. "He sets goals, puts your mind to it."

Despite the competitive energy, however, Thomas says his greatest sense of achievement is not from the number of titles his team receives—it's from the

number of students he can get to college on track scholarships. "Most of my girls get college scholarships," he says proudly. "That's always been the highlight of the year for me, when they go away to school." Thomas has sent more than 20 athletes to college on athletic scholarships. "I just had a girl sign with Gardner-Webb [University]," he says. "I found her in my PE class. She was a shy girl. And she didn't know anything about track. It just really warms my heart. She went from not even knowing what shot put is to being a state champion in two years."

Both Sampson and Jones plan to run track in college, Sampson while studying nursing and Jones forensic science. Thomas also says the opportunity of a college scholarship is something he emphasizes from the moment they join the team. "The girls come from various backgrounds socioeconomically," he says. "A lot of them come from single parent homes, so I'm like a father to them. The girls are basically like a family. We all stick together."

Jones and Sampson additionally both say that Thomas is like a second father to them, Sampson specifically saying that Thomas always goes "out of the way" for his team, from driving them to meets or home to buying them new shoes and uniforms. "If he didn't, we'd have to use those ratty uniforms the school provides," she says. And Jones believes that if any of Thomas' team members didn't have a home, he would take them in.

In closing, Thomas says the greatest challenge is just getting students to "buy in" to the team and join the family, "but once they buy in, it's easy," he says, laughing. "It almost gets too easy because sometimes when we've been working hard I'll call off a day of practice, and the older girls will say, 'No, coach, we've got to have practice. We've got to have practice.'"



Coaches of the Year: George Sanderlin (left) with Charles Brown; Russell Thomas (right) with Bill Duffey.

Scholarship recipients: Alex Cameron (right) with Charlie Foell; Kenan Farmer (left) with Hawthorne Wesley.