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## New Fairfield senior John Raneri begins season as State Open favorite

Created at 9/21/2009 10:05 PM by Ed Flink

Last modified at 9/23/2009 9:13 PM by Ed Flink



New Fairfield's John Raneri offered an immediate glimpse of his fabulous potential as a freshman during a developmental indoor track meet at Wesleyan University in Middletown when he completed the first leg of the 4x800 relay in 2:10 – and then ran the fourth leg in practically the same time.

"That's when we knew we had somebody special," Rebels' coach Tim Murphy recalled.

Raneri was far from polished back then, however. He was raw and uncertain, with a stride that could hardly be described as smooth.

"I didn't even know how to run an 800," he admitted. "That was my first 800 in high school."

Said Murphy: "He didn't know what to do. I knew he was a decent runner (but) he had an awkward kind of positioning about how he ran. He didn't look like a natural flowing distance runner."

Three years later, Raneri is a self-assured, highly-decorated senior poised to put an exclamation point on his scholastic cross country career after being the State Open runner-up and ninth in New England last autumn.

"We didn't expect him to be the kind of kid that he turned out to be in his junior year," Murphy said.

"Most people do what he did in (their) senior year."

Raneri ran for New Fairfield Flash track, a community organization comprised of middle-school age students from New Fairfield and Sherman, in sixth, seventh and eighth grades. He wasn't a natural.

"In sixth grade I was more towards the back of the pack. In seventh I gained a little ground and eighth grade I really improved a lot. I went from seventh or eighth on the team to third," he said.

He also played youth soccer in those days – that's why he stuck with running, to stay in shape for soccer – and he was good enough to be a starting forward on the Rebels' junior varsity soccer team as a ninth-grader. He never returned to the pitch after doing indoor and outdoor track in the winter and spring of his freshman year.

A cross country neophyte as a sophomore, Raneri finished seventh in the South-West Conference, 12th in Class M and 38th at the State Open.

"I (ran) flat-footed in my freshman and sophomore years," he said. "As soon as I put in the mileage things started turning. I turned over a new leaf when I started running on my toes instead and started getting better turnover."

Raneri began working in March 2008 with assistant coach Geoff Nelson, a 2003 NFHS graduate. Nelson ran for Syracuse University and returned to his alma mater at the request of Murphy to help Raneri. He has been a role model to Raneri, who credits Nelson for changing his mindset and triggering his development.

"He kind of started the fire and it keeps on burning. I have so much motivation every day," Raneri said.

"I just think of the future.

"He showed me that doing longer runs on a recovery day at an easier pace is better than going faster. He showed me different tricks and drills. He kind of changed my philosophy of running. Before I was running 25, 30 miles a week. I wasn't really putting in that much mileage. He taught me that hard work can change your whole perspective on life and the things you do. I've worked hard these past two years and I'm reaping the benefits right now."

Indeed, he improved significantly over the ensuing 18 months and is coming off a breakthrough cross country campaign in which he was the SWC runner-up, the Class M state champion and placed second behind Danbury graduate Tucker Schaefer at the Open with a time of 16:15.

Raneri went on to become a Nike All-America in both indoor and outdoor track as a junior.

"The way I look at it is that John always had the engine and I kind of just started it," Nelson said. "I think the passion clearly was always there. He started to really understand the sport and started to really study the sport. He's really come a long way. I think all the pieces were in place. I think I was the last piece to the puzzle."

Raneri upped the ante as he prepared for this season, doing 70 miles per week for six weeks over the summer compared to one week last summer. He visited Nantucket and Cooperstown, N.Y., and ran in sand on Daytona Beach when he wasn't soaking up the sunshine.

"My summer went very well," he said. "It was a lot of hard mileage and repetitive fartleks. The overall mileage has been good quality mileage and last summer I didn't have as much as that."

He also found time to attend the adidas Running Academy at Camp Mohawk in Cornwall, which is operated by Danbury coach Rob Murray, Weston coach Marty Ogden and Dr. Brian Fullem, a sports medicine Podiatrist from Newtown. It was his first time at the six-year-old camp.

"The Running Academy was awesome," Raneri said. "It was a great combination of coaching techniques, running techniques. It had a little bit of everything that a runner should know and it really educated me on the do's and don'ts of running. Combined with the prior knowledge I had before at Green Mountain (running camp) it really helped my whole running philosophy."

"You have to have a balance in running, with gradual increase in mileage and also consistency. That was one of the things I learned at The Running Academy from Rob Murray. If you're consistently and gradually building up your mileage every week, you're not going to get injured. You're going to be healthy. And if you take the right precautions – you do all the drills before you run and you do the stretching afterwards – it makes the whole running experience a lot better because then you're not getting injured. You feel great most of the time."

The 5-foot-10, 145-pounder isn't built like a typical lanky runner and his strength defines his style. Said Nelson: "He's almost built like a triathlete. He's incredibly strong. He's improved in terms of his speed and his turnover monumentally since I've worked with him but he's certainly more of a strength runner. He'll surge in the middle of the race and outrun in the middle. He's just a tough runner. He's very, very tough. When he's at his best he has no fear. If he's a 9:09 kid he will go after the 8:55 kid with no concern. When it comes to his competitiveness on race day he's as good as anyone I've ever seen."

"He's like a heavyweight boxer when he runs. He will muscle you down when he races and he will come after you with guts," Murphy said. "The kid will run until there is nothing left and keep going."

"I just feel that I work very hard," Raneri said. "I just feel I'm my own individual and I have my own style of running. It may not be like anybody else's but..."

Opposing coaches are respectful and complimentary towards Raneri.

"It seems like he does anything you ask him to do. You can't tire him out. If you told him to run six events in a track meet, he could probably do it," said New Milford coach Chris Bacich. "I don't think he knows what tired is. He's very, very strong. And he's obviously very determined. He's like a machine. It's pretty impressive to watch him in action. He's mentally tough, too."

A low-key kid who remains unaffected by his ever-growing status, Raneri's mellow personality changes when the gun goes off.

"He's an animal. It's like letting a lion out of a cage," Murphy said. "He hates to lose. And he will analyze his race after he's done to pick out where he was strong and where he fell behind. He's got a lot of knowledge. He's one of the smartest runners I've ever met. He knows his competition very well and he's a force to be reckoned with."

Raneri relishes the attention he is attracting from college coaches. He planned to take official visits to the University of North Carolina, Syracuse and Albany, while also considering Notre Dame, Providence and others. He's keeping an open mind.

"It's been great. Most of the coaches that have called me were really nice and accommodating. They really care about you as a person and a runner. They're interested in what your academics are like and what type of training you're doing. Some of them are very personable like that," he said.

The process hasn't been a distraction.

"It's not a burden. Once I get this whole college process done with I'm going to feel a lot better but at the same time it was a great experience," Raneri said.

Raneri's post-season goals? "When I get to Opens I really want a good, fast race there. I want a sub 15:30, or be around 15:30 by Opens," he said. "I want to be up in front in a really good position in New England's so I could pull off the win potentially because I know there's some very good competition." He believes he's properly prepared. There will be no regrets.

"I feel great. I gradually built up to 70 miles and it's almost like clockwork right now. Sunday's I've been doing aqua jogging (in a pool). It helps with recovery. You're off your feet and you're getting no impact whatsoever but at the same time you're getting great cardio," Raneri said.

"Mentally, I really don't feel any pressure. I should do what I have to do. I just run my own race and hope for the best."

His best so far, a result of natural talent bubbling to the surface through good coaching and an insatiable work ethic, has already been beyond his wildest dreams.

"I think it's amazing. I'm kind of shocked that I'm at this level right now where college coaches are calling for me to go to their college," Raneri said. "It's kind of surprising because two years ago I never would have thought this ever would have happened. It's been a great four years of learning and I'm lucky to have great coaches and great teammates."

Chances are he's only scratched the surface of his ability.

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