A Look Into Three Young Track & Field Lives

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Over the last century, college athletics has grown in scale and scope throughout America, morphing into what is now a multimillion-dollar industry and an ingrained part of the country’s culture and conscience. The best athletes in the two highest profile sports, basketball and football, are awarded with million-dollar professional contracts and are watched by an audience of millions – thanks, in large part, to the fact that every major broadcaster now has a contract with the National Collegiate Athletics Association to broadcast games from one of the two premiere sports. As the pair of basketball and football brings in the most money for schools, broadcasters and sponsors, though, the NCAA reinforces the merit and benefit of every college sport, claiming that athletic participation is “about learning, balance, spirit, community, fair play and character” for all 380,000 student-athletes (2006-2007 Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete), whether they play football at Notre Dame in a stadium seating upwards of eighty thousand fans or one of the much less heralded sports, such as tennis or field hockey or golf at a much smaller school, in front of an audience that is often limited to teammates, coaches and family members.

The track and field and cross country program at La Salle and its members certainly fall into the latter category. Although the team has been the school’s most accomplished over the last decade and is the only sport to have earned a conference championship – combining for a total of 11 between men and women – for the school since La Salle since joining the Atlantic 10 over in 1995, La Salle’s track and field athletes compete and succeed while remaining anonymous among a majority of their classmates and are only recognized by fellow runners and a select few other close friends (2006-2007 Guide 15). Nonetheless, most of these runners, whose preferred races vary
from 55 to 10,000 meters in length, enjoy their sport and are living the NCAA’s mission of developing determination, passion and a work ethic through athletics (2006-2007 Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete). Along the way, La Salle’s track and field athletes are given strong and consistent guidance by three bright and dedicated former collegiate runners currently working for the Explorers’ team as assistant coaches; these three coaches, closer in age and mentality to the students they instruct and aid than to the majority of La Salle faculty, help to mentor current athletes while simultaneously modeling the benefits, both physical and mental, of dedicatedly graduating college as a track and field athlete.

Jenna Darcy, Bryan Skelly and Chris Franklin are the three assistants who make up the coaching staff of head coach Charles Torpey, whose 14th season at La Salle and 31st of his entire coaching career began in the fall of 2006 (2006-2007 Guide 2). All three are former individual conference champions and each graduated from high school in 2000 from high schools in the greater Philadelphia area: Skelly from Washington Township High School (Skelly 1:00) and Darcy from Shawnee High School (Darcy, 1:00), both in New Jersey, and Franklin from Allentown, Pennsylvania’s William Allen High School (Franklin 3:00). Aside from these commonalities, though, they took very different paths through their childhood and young adulthood en route to their current position of working and coaching together.

Darcy was born in Philadelphia and lived briefly in Georgia at a young age before spending most of her formative years in New Jersey (Darcy 1:00-2:00). After several years of recreational soccer, she first forayed into track and field as a substitute on a friend’s relay team in eighth grade, and from that her running quickly evolved into the
“first thing that became real serious in terms of sports” (Darcy 3:00). From that auspicious start, she found great success on the high school level, earning “All-South Jersey” honors for the sport in each of her four years (2001 Guide 10). As a junior, she was the state’s 3200-meter champion (Darcy 6:00), but cites as her favorite high school memory a much smaller-scale race against a rival high school in which she anchored her team’s relay to victory, running a personal best and exhausting herself to the point of having to “keel over on [her] side dying for an hour” – a sensation that is likely remembered fondly only among runners – upon crossing the finish line in victory (Darcy 7:00).

Skelly was born into a self-described typical and normal American family in Turnersville, New Jersey, and, like Darcy and many other American youngsters, played a variety of other sports as a child before starting track upon entering high school (Skelly 1:00-3:00). He, too, earned multiple “All-South Jersey” titles as a runner (2001 Guide 8), and, while he was never a state champion like Darcy, he was still dedicated to his sport to the point of essentially managing his own training after growing tired of dealing with repeated coaching changes for Washington Township’s track and field team (Skelly 5:00). As an avid fan of sports in general, Skelly says that “pretty much anything athletically-minded I could watch” then jokingly asserts that that is pathetic and the he has “wasted a lot of time” on sports (Skelly 14:00); appropriately, as a high school student, he had little or no involvement in activities outside of track and field, save for perhaps a brief stint “maybe in Spanish club” for the sake of his college résumé (Skelly 4:00). Such love of sports, particularly track, also explains why his favorite high school memory was running the same leg in a relay as future Olympian and American record-
setting runner Alan Webb at Penn Relays, one of the most competitive and prestigious track and field meets in the country (Skelly 6:00).

Franklin, on the other hand, was born in an American army base in Germany, into an “army brat” family, but moved to Allentown, Pennsylvania at the age of three (Franklin 1:00). He claims the only sports he played up until his junior year of high school were video games, but that during that year he joined the football team to bulk up his skinny, scrawny 98-pound body (Franklin 3:00). Despite the lack of any athletic background, though, he immediately excelled on the track and field team in the following spring, placing third in the state meet in the 110-meter hurdles then winning the same event as a senior (Franklin 4:00). That title is the moment he cites as his best accomplishment from running in high school, but, above and beyond any single race, he speaks glowingly and fondly of William Allen’s hurdles coach, a man with whom Franklin would develop a “father-son” relationship and visit – along with the coach’s own children – frequently (Franklin 5:00).

Despite his high school success and the opportunity to attend school on a track and field scholarship after graduation, Franklin simply “did not want to go” to college (Franklin 5:00). That changed quickly, however, when the fall of 2000 saw Franklin working three jobs; when he was approached, then, by a representative of Mohawk Valley Community College about running for the school, he quickly adopted the attitude that one “can’t beat a free education” and quickly enrolled and started hurdling again while taking classes towards an eventual English major (Franklin 6:00). Darcy and Skelly, on the other hand, took much more direct routes to college, and both started their collegiate running careers at La Salle University at the same time that Franklin was
struggling with three jobs. Darcy was drawn to La Salle for reasons fairly common among student-athletes and says she was impressed by the school’s academic reputation and the team’s history of success, and was particularly influenced by the fact that her then-best friend, a fellow runner from Shawnee, had enrolled at the college a year before (Darcy 11:00-13:00). Interestingly, Skelly liked La Salle partially for a directly opposite reason: after also looking into Villanova, Penn and Duke, he chose La Salle since he was not sure he would be able to handle the academics of the other schools and preferred the “more comfortable” environment of La Salle compared to the others’ academic prestige (Skelly 8:00). When the two were looking at colleges as high school seniors, head coach Charles Torpey and the Explorer runners had accomplished a wide range of successes.

According to the media guide published in 2001, based on team history until what would become the freshman year of Darcy and Skelly at La Salle:

In 1996, in the program’s first year in the Atlantic 10 Conference, Torpey led the men’s track team to the A-10 Indoor title and also garnered Coach of the Year honors. In the past five years, Explorers’ squads have been nationally ranked in the men’s distance medley relay, the 4x800 relay and the 4x1500 (mile) relays, and the women have also been ranked in the 4x1500... La Salle also had its first two All-Americans since 1965, when recent graduates Brian Gallagher and Theresa Carroll both were named All-Americans at the 1998 NCAA track championships (2001 Guide 2).

Although La Salle was not in the same stratum as recent national champions such as Arkansas or Stanford (NCAASports’ Outdoor Track Records), it appealed to the two future coaches as a program on the rise and as a good match for their own talents.

As a part of La Salle’s class of 2004, both received financial aid packages with a combination of academic- and athletic-based money. Unlike many incoming freshmen who struggle first at college-level running and require time to train before being able to compete in and win races, Skelly was immediately successful and was named “All-
Conference” within the A-10 for both cross country in the fall and indoor track in the winter (2001-2002 Guide 12). Darcy merited an equal award for her cross country season and was also a “Junior All-American” for the 1500-meter race in the spring outdoor track and field season (2001-2002 Guide 5). By the conclusion of each of their respective careers, both runners had helped the Explorers to three first-place finishes in the A-10 cross country championship and been named “Most Outstanding Performer” at the indoor track championships (2005-2006 Guide 15).

At the same time, Franklin’s hurdling career was about to take him even further from his Pennsylvania home, as he would leave Mohawk Valley after two years to attend Eastern Kentucky University full-time, again on a track scholarship (Franklin 7:00). Like his fellow coaches, Franklin earned individual conference championships for the 60-meter hurdles, 110-meter hurdles, 400-meter hurdles, and the 4x400-meter relay (2006-2007 Guide 2). As La Salle excelled in the Atlantic 10, so, too, did EKU in the Ohio Valley Conference; the difference between the experience of Franklin at EKU and Darcy and Skelly at La Salle came not from team success but from their personal and social interactions.

Unlike the other two who stayed close to home, Franklin found himself outside of the Northeast for the first time since leaving Germany as a toddler, and came into the state of Kentucky and saw a “whole ‘nother culture down South,” one that was “naïve to how the cultures are in the [outside] world” (Franklin 8:00). Also, since Franklin is African-American whereas Darcy and Skelly are white, EKU presented the hurdler with some unique challenges and issues based on race. He recalls feeling as if he were “down there by himself”, and was led to join an African-American fraternity while trying to
make Kentucky his home (Franklin 9:00). At one point he punched a white teammate
over the use of the n-word and was suspended from track and field; dealing with the
judicial process and counseling classes as a result of that incident, though, actually led
him to later become best friends with the same teammate he had punched (Franklin
10:00). Ultimately, “all the athletes hung out – black, Hispanic or white”, as well as
Kenyans recruited to EKU as distance runners, but Franklin himself “had two different
lives”, one with track teammates and one with his other group of friends (Franklin 11:00-
13:00). Skelly, on the other hand, looks back on his time as a student at La Salle and
wonders if he ever knew more than five people outside the track and field team, or if that
many non-runners knew him (Skelly 15:00). Darcy, too, formed the “same group of
friends from being around the team all the time,” but also had a slightly greater range of
involvement with students outside of La Salle track and field (Darcy 14:00).

The three coaches also had vastly different academic success in college; Darcy
was a multiple-time Academic All-American, an award given for GPA in combination
with athletic success (2006-2007 Guide, 2), whereas Skelly had to maintain a 2.75 GPA
to keep his academic scholarships and did just that and nothing more, never recording a
GPA higher than 2.83 in every semester beyond his first (Skelly 17:00). Perhaps not
surprisingly, Darcy is currently working towards a graduate degree in clinical counseling
psychology (Darcy 20:00), while Skelly graduated in 2004 with a degree in history and
has tried and failed thrice to take graduate-level classes in that area (Skelly 19:00). The
academics of each also correspond to their career plans: Darcy has finished her graduate
coursework and is in the middle of an internship working with autistic children (21:00)
but is unsure what exact field she will work in beyond La Salle’s track and field program.
Skelly, on the other hand, works solely for the team at the moment – furthermore, his last outside job was at a running store – and does not want a career outside the field of track coaching.

Franklin's story may fall somewhere in between; he graduated EKU in 2005 with degrees in both history and anthropology, with the intent of working with the archives of an African-American art museum (Franklin 15:00). Unfortunately, his roommate situation fell through and he was forced to move back to his family in Pennsylvania, where he quickly found employment as a Gap manager (Franklin 16:00). Like his situation coming out of high school, he was again in an unsatisfying job, and he somewhat reluctantly returned to the area of track and field by introducing himself to Torpey at La Salle. Despite having previously told himself, “I would never be a coach”, Franklin immediately found enjoyment in his work at La Salle, which was done on a volunteer basis for a short period before he was officially hired (Franklin 16:00). Despite his previous objections, he now says of his job that, “I don’t even consider this work, this is fun; I love doing this… [it] couldn’t get any better than this” (Franklin 18:00) and that “It’s never a challenge to coach someone, it’s trying to make someone understand that they have confidence or they have the body… when you complain or do this-and-that, it’s harder, it’s tiring” (Franklin 21:00). Despite the happiness and love he expresses for track and coaching, he also has a fierier attitude towards the competitive side of the sport, one he claims was instilled for him at EKU. On the subject of racing against local rivals, he states, “If I go to La Salle University, I’m not going to like you because you go to Villanova, I’m going to hate you” (Franklin 30:00).
Skelly, too, has a passion for his job that makes both his own work better and more enjoyable while also benefiting the student-athletes he coaches. He takes pride in the ability of La Salle to beat better-funded teams such as Penn State – a school that can give the NCAA-maximum 18 scholarships to women and 12.6 to men (2006-2007 NCAA Division I Manual), while La Salle is limited by its athletic department to 8 for men and 7 for women (Skelly 34:00). In his mind, La Salle’s track team is made of a “certain type of kid”, one who may not be the most honored coming out of high school but one with a genuine interest in the sport of track and field and in bettering himself as much as possible during his four years of collegiate running (Skelly 35:00). When recruiting potential La Salle athletes, Skelly emphasizes the friendly, social, impromptu and familial of the team, calling the track and field team a “big clique” (Skelly 23:00). Although he admits that an equal number of high school runners are turned away by that idea as are attracted to it, he genuinely believes that the current way of things are for the best, and that the kind of high school runner that is wanted at La Salle is one who welcomes that kind of team (Skelly 25:00). Over his years at La Salle, both as a student and as a coach, Skelly has developed a sense of pride and love for the team to the point that he says, “I think everyone should come here, and I’m fairly disappointed when people decide not to” (Skelly 37:00).

Darcy, as previously mentioned, is the only one of the three with current plans to pursue an eventual career outside of coaching; because she is the only one currently to have to split her coaching time with requirements of her internship and graduate classes, she is not involved to the same extent of the other two, but nevertheless speaks highly of the improvements which have came to La Salle since her first weeks on campus in 2000
(Darcy 23:00). Speaking of the runners she currently coaches, Darcy believes that they “all set good examples” with their concentration and work ethic, and that such qualities have earned the team a greater degree of trust and leeway from Coach Torpey since her own time as a runner (Darcy 24:00). Looking towards her future, she is ready to complete her Masters’ degree and start a career in psychology; with regards to the possibility of continuing to coach, she is considering doing so on the high school level, since such a position could be better balanced with an outside career, as opposed to the full-time requirements of a college position (Darcy 31:00). Within any job, though, her last eight years as a track and field athlete and then coach have left her with the lifelong desire to run “seriously and competitively” (Darcy 31:00) and, as such, whether or not she works with track and field or coaches ever again, she will always be a La Salle runner.

Franklin and Skelly, on the other hand, appear to have futures that are much more directly shaped by their experiences with track and field. Skelly does not know what his next stop past La Salle will be, nor when it will occur, but he has developed such a fondness for his sport that he is completely set on a career as a coach (Skelly 38:00). Franklin is approaching the future with a sharper sense of direction, saying, “My goal is to be the head coach at Muhlenberg”, a small college in his hometown of Allentown, within four or five years (Franklin 42:00).

In looking at La Salle’s track and field assistants, one sees three young men and women, from backgrounds with an equal number of similarities and differences, who have been brought together by an interest in running, a dedication to the sport, and an ability to do so well. Jenna Darcy used her running as a platform to academic and career success; Bryan Skelly, a lifelong and enthusiastic sports fan, found an activity he could
call his own, succeed at, and make into an ideal career; and Chris Franklin discovered a
natural talent that quickly took him from being a 98-pound, video game-playing high
school junior to an elite collegiate runner whose abilities fully paid his way through
school and led him to eventually discover a job that he could both have fun with and take
pride in. The current athletes of La Salle, then, are given three great role models, people
who have put hard work and sacrifice into their running and can now claim the benefits,
modeling three different type of success stories that arose from their collegiate running
careers.
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