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COLLEGE CROSS COUNTRY

Coach impressed by cadets on fast track

By AMY MORITZ

News Sports Reporter

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Laura Kirchgraber

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When she went through the interview process, Laura Finucane Kirchgraber was repeatedly told how she would be a role model for her student-athletes.

As it turns out, the position as the head women's cross country coach at Army offers as much an opportunity to work with role models as to be one.

This fall, Kirchgraber became the first female head coach since the women's team began in 1977.

The Mount Mercy and 2001 Canisius College graduate appreciates the honor but finds her own inspiration in the character of her runners.

"At the academy we hear over and over that coaches are the day-to-day role models for the cadets," Kirchgraber said. "We interact more on a daily basis with the cadets but really, they also set an example to me and I feel like it's an honor to coach them. Last year, we graduated the last class that entered the academy during peace time. Now, all the cadets here entered post 9/11. Their dedication and their desire to

Kirchgraber came to Army as an assistant cross country and track coach in 2004 after spending three years as the head coach at Mount Mercy and one year as a graduate assistant at Canisius. She was the captain of the Griffs' cross country and track teams, and left Canisius with a master's degree in exercise physiology. She recently married Capt. Kevin Kirchgraber, who is serving in Afghanistan.

Her first year at West Point, she helped the Black Knights win their first Patriot League cross country title since 1997 with five cadets earning all-conference honors.

This year, she has a young team after four of her top five runners graduated. While the results aren't as impressive as the last two seasons, there has been steady improvement - both in team and individual results - throughout the fall. And the reality of life at the academy dictates that while winning races, meets and titles is important, varsity athletics is not the top priority. It falls to third, behind academics and military obligations.

"The athletes here are different," Kirchgraber said. "At a civilian school, kids take some classes then nap before practice and you can push them pretty hard. Here, they have very demanding physical education classes so they've already had challenging physical activity before practice. You have to take that into consideration."

It also has to be taken into consideration long before practice time begins - all the way back to the recruiting process. While recruiting is the lifeblood of any collegiate program, getting the right fit for West Point is more challenging, but ultimately, Kirchgraber feels, more rewarding.

"You're looking for athletes who not only are Division I prospects but have great SAT scores, a high class rank and community service," Kirchgraber said. "Students also have to pass a medical exam and a physical test. You need the whole package plus someone who also wants to serve their country, but when you find that person, that's the type of athlete you want to coach. In a sense, I'm spoiled here. My athletes are hard working and motivated."

And those athletes in turn motivate her.

Take the example of senior Margaret Clark. In March 2005, Clark set the school record in the 1,000 meters at the ECAC Championships with a time of 2:53.45. This year, she had the rank of deputy brigade commander - the second highest ranking position a cadet can hold at West Point and a rare honor for a varsity athlete to hold.

"She's just a great example of the opportunities that are available to females," Kirchgraber said. "Yes, the ratio obviously has more males to females but there are plenty of opportunities for women here."

e-mail: amoritz@buffnews.com

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