

Onna Okeke's three gold medals pace the St. Anne's Cygnets to the CISAA Novice Girls' Track Title

It was an auspicious debut for the St. Anne's Cygnets at the CISAA Track and Field Championships in Toronto last week.

The first-year Aurora school, comprised of Grade 9 students, captured the CISAA Novice Track and Field Championship with an impressive haul of medals at York University.

Remarkably, 11 of 15 Cygnets earned points at the GTA meet.

The Cygnet that glided highest was Onna Okeke who captured gold medals in the 80m hurdles, the 300m hurdles, and the 200m dash.

Dave Hunt, a veteran sprint and hurdles coach at University of Toronto, the Canadian Olympic Team, and Unionville High School who is assisting the SAS and SAC Track teams, called the Cygnets' accomplishment a "full team effort, but not without drama."

Coach Hunt praised the nascent skills of Okeke, a national level swimmer, who "took up all her events with incredible competitive aggression."

"She improved by two seconds to win the 80m hurdles on Monday."

Unfortunately, later in the day, Okeke left early in her exchange zone during the 4 x 100 team relay and the Cygnets team was disqualified. One of Coach Hunt's former Olympian hurdlers Sarah Wells attended the meet "to spend time with the girls to encourage and motivate them."

Wells witnessed the relay "catastrophe" and, according to Hunt, "spent her time consoling Onna with a brilliant motivational talk and helped prepare her for a second day of competition."

The impact of the wisdom imparted by Olympians Hunt and Wells on the Grade 9 athlete was measurable. Hunt noted that "Onna responded with a gold medal in the 300m hurdles and, with a dive, won gold in the 200m dash, too. Finally, Onna ran the anchor leg for the 4 x 400 relay as our Novice team was taking on mostly Senior relay teams."

"The girls placed 5th—just short of qualifying for the Metro Regionals. Onna's three golds helped secure the championship trophy."

J.J. Patterson, Assistant Head of School and Director of Upper School at St. Anne's, couldn't be happier with the performance of both the Cygnets Cross Country team earlier in the school year and the Track team this Spring.

"The success of our Cross-Country and Track teams is really attributed to a combination of factors. The biggest thing was that our athletes demonstrated exceptional dedication and determination throughout the season. They are outstanding athletes, very coachable, unafraid to try new things, and always eager to do their best. They worked hard during training sessions and consistently pushed themselves to improve." Patterson also praised the coaches of both squads: "Our coaching staff also played a crucial role in guiding and supporting the athletes. The Cross-Country team was coached by Sabrina D'Angelo, St. Anne's Head of School, who is an experienced coach and athlete, having competed in the Boston Marathon. In the spring, the Track and Field team was coached by teacher, Brianna Nguyen, and we had the pleasure of bringing Dave Hunt on board, a national team sprint and hurdles coach, who provided the girls with effective training programs and strategies. Everything tied together well with strong teamwork and camaraderie, which fostered a positive and motivating environment that contributed to our success."

Echoing the sentiments of Coach Hunt, Patterson applauded the efforts of Onna Okeke and the Grade 9 Cygnet's three golden performances.

Onna came into the track team with little track experience and was a little scared of the hurdles, which made it even more impressive when she took home the gold medals in both the 80 meter and 300 meter hurdle events at the CISAA finals in addition to the gold in the 200 meter dash. Her growth was incredible, and her positive attitude pulled the team together.

In addition to Okeke, the Assistant Head of School also praised Maya Walker and Harper Franks for their conspicuous accomplishments. All three Grade 9 students qualified for the Metro Championships and Patterson noted that Walker is one of our most exceptional track athletes.

Maya is capable in many events and participated (and medaled!) in events ranging from pole vault and 80m hurdles to javelin and high jump in past meets! Her pole vaulting is always a feat to witness, and she consistently proves to be a fierce competitor, even against the senior girls and boys in the event. She captured bronze in the 80m hurdles and the pole vault at the CISAA championships, and her top height for the pole vault surpassed all the boys in the competition.

Patterson and her coaching staff were also impressed with Harper Franks' versatility as she has starred in Cross Country and Track and Field in the Cygnets' first year.

After leading her team to OFSAA for cross country, we knew Harper would be key for our long-distance events, but it was her steady leadership that set her apart. With her experience, she helped train many teammates who were also registered for the 800, 1500, or 3000 m events. At the CISAA finals, she qualified for the Metros Championship in all three events!

Despite highlighting these three individual performances, Patterson was quick to point out as Coach Dave Hunt did that the Cygnets' success was a team effort.

These athletes have consistently demonstrated remarkable skills and dedication, contributing significantly to our team's success. However, it's important to acknowledge that our entire team played a vital role in winning the novice girls category at the CISAA finals. The St. Anne's School Track and Field team sent 15 Grade 9 athletes to the CISAA Championships, and 11 earned points toward the team total earning them the Novice Girls Championship.

The St. Anne's Cygnets are certainly off to a flying start in Athletics with remarkable accomplishments accrued in their first year of CISAA competition.

By Jim Stewart