

Going the extra mile

People oftentimes meet their best friends in unique ways. For seniors Piper Wiest and Marianna Vandembout, it was on the back of a school bus on the way to McCallum after a district cross country meet.

Wiest began running in her 8th grade year at O'Henry. She eagerly started practice at McCallum in the summer before 9th grade, and still considers her first few days of practice with the team her favorite memories of her running career.

Wiest explained that she was, of course, nervous about her first high school experience.

"But what goes along with all of those memories of worry are those of encouragement and kindness the whole team showed me," Wiest said. "I still remember the captain my freshman year, Ellie, showing me how to do the warm-up and the leg swings. No one on the team remained intimidating after the first few minutes of my practice, because they quickly introduced themselves and adopted me into the team."

Vandembout's first practice at McCallum was much different. She joined in September, at the start of school, but in cross country, that is halfway through the season. On her first day, the team ran two laps around the school to 49th street, looped around to Houston and ran down to Burnet before heading back onto Grover.

"It's a run that we do now, [and] it's super easy," Vandembout said. "But I thought I was going to die. I had never run more than a mile before."

With time, the run became easier and Vandembout was able to push herself harder than she had ever done before.



Piper Wiest, Riley Reynolds, and Marianna Vandebout approach the mile marker at the district meet. Photo by Kristen Tibbetts.

For most of the season, the two future captains hardly ever interacted. Once, during a 400-meter repeat workout, Wiest was keeping a steady pace when, for the first time, Vandebout ran past and finished the lap ahead.

“I remember thinking ‘She’s gonna go places. She’ll be passing us soon enough.’” Wiest said.

It took another year for that to fully happen, but by their junior year, Wiest and Vandebout ran neck-in-neck.

“When they were freshmen they were two very shy young ladies,” Coach Ashton said. “[But] it was through running that they formed a really strong friendship.”

Due to a lack of seniors on the team last year, there were not any captains. So, for their senior year, Wiest and Vandebout asked coach Ashton to make them co-captains.

"We hadn't had a captain in a long time, [so] we asked [Coach Ashton] because it meant a lot to us to be able to represent this team," Wiest said. "Now, being a senior and a co-captain, I have the job Ellie had. I show people the warm-ups and introduce them to the team. The importance of having a strong, kind, and encouraging team is incredibly pertinent to me because of my own memories."

Coach Ashton agreed, and Wiest and Vandebout took their new roles very seriously. During summer practices, whenever Coach Ashton had to be out of town, they led practice on the McCallum track, coming up with new workouts and stretches each day.

"They're a good influence," junior Gabby Sherwood said. "They've encouraged and pushed their teammates to do better."

For Wiest and Vandebout, their final year running cross country at McCallum was full of sentimentality.

"Freshmen year I didn't know anyone [at McCallum] from my middle school," Wiest said. "So [cross country] really helped me get to know people. I had something, you know?"

Both co-captains agreed that running for McCallum was a better experience than they would have had at any other school.

"I know people who run for other teams and there's a lot of pressure to run really fast," Vandebout said. "[But here], you just have to do your best. [Coach Ashton] doesn't want you to be lazy, but we don't have anything like 'if you're not running a six-minute mile then you're not good enough'."

The district meet, the last one of the season, was tough for both Wiest and Vandebout.

"The last meet I'll ever run in my life," Wiest said. "Just thinking about it [was hard]."

Vandebout was quick to remind her that it was not necessarily

the last meet. Both runners plan on continuing cross country in college, but not on the varsity level.

When asked what encourages them on the most during meets, both runners concluded that motivation to run well had to be self-derived, but different cheers could encourage them to push themselves further.

“Anytime my dad cheers me on,” Vandembout said. “He’s my biggest fan. Whenever I hear him, that’s my encouragement.”

For next season’s team, Wiest and Vandembout had very straight-forward advice.

“Just run. It’s not that deep.” Vandembout said.

“If you stop, you give in,” Wiest added. “You lose that self-motivation. No matter how hard it gets, just keep running.”



Marianna Vandembout holds up Piper Wiest before the team packed up the bus on the way back to McCallum after the last meet of the season.

Even though the cross country season has come to a close, Vandebout and Wiest are not done running. They look forward to track season in the spring.

"I kind of need to be on a schedule and be running and active." Wiest said.

"I rely on it," Vandebout added. "I need the endorphins."

Both Wiest and Vandebout insisted that cross country has meant a lot to them throughout all four years at McCallum.

"I feel like I've really grown from it," Wiest said. "I've always been kind of quiet, so it's really allowed me a small ground of people that I can really get to know, and now lead."