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# CHAMPIONSHIP GENERATOR

ALL-AMERICAN DISTANCE RUNNER **KARISSA SCHWEIZER** IS BURNING UP NCAA CROSS-COUNTRY COURSES AND IGNITING THE **MIZZOU TRACK AND FIELD PROGRAM**. IN 2017-18, SHE PLANS TO KICK IT INTO OVERDRIVE. ➔ MARCUS WILKINS 📷 NICHOLAS BENNER

**It was a moment of realization, followed by one of determination, acceleration and jubilation. † Karissa Schweizer, Mizzou’s nascent distance-running superstar, had her sights set on a top five finish at the NCAA Women’s Cross Country Championship Nov. 19, 2016, in Terre Haute, Indiana. Nearing the home stretch, she overtook Kansas runner Sharon Lokedi for third place, and it dawned on Schweizer: She should aim higher.**

† Karissa Schweizer, shown here in her triumphant moment at the NCAA Women’s Cross Country Championship, is the only female athlete in Mizzou history to win multiple NCAA titles.

“I was gaining on the leaders, and they kept looking back at me,” says Schweizer, who shot to the front with a late burst of speed known as a “kick.” “When I finally passed [leader Erin Finn of Michigan], I thought, ‘Is this really happening? Is this one of my dreams?’ It still gives me goosebumps.”

The win, the first individual national cross

country title in Mizzou history, forced Schweizer to adjust her goals yet again. For an encore, she won a pair of 2017 national championships in the indoor and outdoor 5,000-meter events, joining wrestler J’den Cox as the only MU athletes with three NCAA titles.

Schweizer’s success has put the program in the national spotlight. Now, heading into her senior season, she is poised to smash SEC records and collect more hardware as one of the nation’s premier runners.

“Karissa has opened recruiting doors for us,” says Marc Burns, coach of the men’s and women’s cross-country teams. “There was a time when the top Missouri kids wouldn’t consider coming to Mizzou on the distance side. Now we are talking to all the top kids in Missouri.”

**It Runs in the Family**

As All-American distance runners at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Schweizer’s father and grandfather, Mike and Frank, know what it means to push themselves. Frank is a legendary track coach in Iowa, where his career spanned 47 years. Karissa’s mother, Kathy, was also an accomplished middle-distance runner in Minnesota.





The Schweizers, however, didn't push Karissa onto the track. She came to love running of her own accord.

"She was always a little timid when it came to physical contact in volleyball, basketball or soccer," says Frank, who still talks to his granddaughter the night before every race. "At her first track practice in the fifth grade, the coaches put Karissa about six rows back in a group of 50 or 60 boys and girls. The race started and she shoved her way up front (to win). That's when I realized she *does* have an aggressive side; she just had to find the right outlet. The track was that place."

Competition was just as fierce at the family's Urbandale, Iowa, home. Younger brother Ryan, now a runner at Notre Dame University, younger sister Kelsey, a track athlete at Dowling Catholic High School, and Karissa were always teasing and challenging each other — albeit (usually) good-naturedly.

"Karissa is really strong-willed," says Kelsey, who anchored a championship 4x800 relay squad in May at the Drake Relays in Des Moines, Iowa. "She has taught me not to give up when you want to. Only give up when you have to."

At the Honda Cup Sports Award ceremony in Los Angeles, where Karissa was a finalist for national female athlete of the year, she summed up her personality in three words: competitive, determined and a little sassy.

"For someone as good as she is, she's very humble," says MU's Burns. "She's a polite, Midwestern kid from Iowa, but underneath it all, she's a competitive beast."

### The Next Gear

Schweizer's hereditary edge and natural determination alone would probably be enough to make her one of the nation's best distance runners. Mix in an injury-free career — virtually unheard of for a college runner entering her senior season — and the advantage is tremendous. Fortune has smiled on Schweizer, to be sure, but she is also dedicated to nutrition and self-care, and she possesses a keen awareness of her body's limits.

"Any time I get a little knee or hip pain, I go to the trainers right away and tell them what's up," says Schweizer, who hopes to pursue a career in physical training or nutrition. "And this year, I started going to bed a little earlier than normal."

The next phase? Ramping up her killer instinct. Before the NCAA Championships in Eu-

gene, Oregon, where Schweizer won her third national title, Burns urged her to assert control early and to dictate the pace of the race. Schweizer was reluctant at first, being used to hanging back and relying on that signature kick. "I said, 'I think you're at the level where you should just go out there and destroy everybody,'" Burns says. "We know when you drop the hammer, there's no one who can hang with you. The night before the race, she finally said, 'Yeah, you're right.'"

Burns says that, after college, Schweizer can push herself to another training level and increase her mileage. Professional distance runners don't have to pace themselves through the NCAA's three-pronged cross-country, indoor and outdoor seasons.

Schweizer also proved she can compete with the sport's elite when she finished fourth in a field loaded with American record holders and Olympians at the USA Track and Field Championships June 24 in Sacramento, California. She bested one Olympian and might have finished higher, had she not made a tactical error attempting to pass a more experienced runner on the inside. She cut off Schweizer and forced her around the pack.

Schweizer, now the face of the Mizzou cross-country program, will be running with a proverbial target on her back while SEC opponents try to catch up in 2017-18. She'll also be leading the pack for one of the nation's up-and-coming programs.

"I enjoy the whole process of the race, not just the running," Schweizer says. "I am motivated by a desire to be the best I can be, to show that all of the hard work has paid off and to see how much more I can do." **M**

### Catch Them If You Can



Running comes naturally to Karissa Schweizer's family. Clockwise from top: Grandpa Frank was an All-American at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Mom, Kathy, ran 800s and 1500s in college. Younger sister, Kelsey, is just getting warmed up in high school. Brother, Ryan, runs for Notre Dame University, and dad, Mike, followed in his father's cleat steps as an All-American at Mankato.



→ Karissa Schweizer dominates competition during day four of the NCAA Outdoor Championships, June 10, in Eugene, Oregon.