

Choices and consequences

Northern's cross country and ski coach teaches focus

By CINDY PAAVOLA '84

For NMU cross country and ski coach **Sten Fjeldheim '86**, life is good, and he knows it.

He and his family — wife Pamela and children Ing, Kirsten, and Stig — are healthy and happy. He loves his job. He lives in a place he calls “one of the best on Earth.”

His women's cross country team recently qualified for the NCAA Championship for the first time in school history and finished eighth of 24 teams.

Three of his Nordic skiers — Caitlin Compton, Melissa Oram, and Aubrey Smith — qualified for the women's U.S. Junior World Championship Team that competed in Slovakia last winter where Smith had the best-ever finish of any American woman at the event, as well as Chris Cook, who qualified for the men's U.S. team.

Last spring, Fjeldheim's Nordic squads swept the NCAA Central Regional meet to allow full-team participation at the NCAA Championships, where Abby Larson was the highest-placing American in the NCAA women's Nordic event.

And in November, Fjeldheim was selected the Great Lakes Region Cross Country Coach of the Year for the first time in his 13-year career. In September, Fjeldheim was honored as the U.S. Ski Team's 2000 Developmental Coach of the Year, an award that crosses all ski disciplines at all developmental levels.

Fjeldheim, who first coached

NMU's ski team from 1986-94 then did a stint with the U.S. national and junior national programs from 1994-97 before returning to NMU in 1998, says he is honored to receive the recognition, but never set out to do so. Attaining such accolades is not on his list of priorities — and Fjeldheim's life and coaching philosophies are all about priorities.

“I tell my students and student-athletes all the time that life is about choices and consequences. Each choice brings a consequence, and how you react to consequences determines your journey. To achieve any goal you have to understand that,” said Fjeldheim.

“In my athletes' lives right now they have three major choices: school, skiing/running, and social activities. I tell them to make sure they pick the right two,” he said with a chuckle. “Some also squeeze in jobs, which makes the choices that much more difficult.”

When it comes to training, the



In September, Fjeldheim was inducted into the Upper Peninsula Sports Hall of Fame, which he said, “meant more to me than even the national award.”

NMU coach believes Nordic skiers are among the most concentrated, dedicated, and physically well-trained athletes in the world.

“Nordic skiing is the most complex sport to train and develop race strategy for; it requires year-round commitment,” said Fjeldheim. “To ski at the elite level, you must train every muscle of the body. Unlike most sports where there is dominant use of

an area of the body, Nordic skiing requires equal strength in both the upper and lower body and superior cardiovascular endurance."

To meet the challenge of ongoing intense training, all NMU women skiers are also members of the cross country team. This interdisciplinary training has allowed the skiers to focus on maintaining the highest fitness level while challenging the runners to heighten their training to keep up with the skiers on the cross country trails.

Fjeldheim, a member of the U.S. Ski Team from 1980-86, understands what it takes to ski at the international level, and he is confident that Northern will produce several U.S. Olympians in the near future, maybe as soon as the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Games.

"There is no doubt in my mind that we have on our roster today future Olympians," he said.

Fjeldheim is extremely proud that his ski roster consists of American athletes.

"I don't believe we need to find Norwegians or Swedes to be a successful program. We are doing it with Americans, and I'm proud of that," said Fjeldheim, a native of Haugesund, Norway, who came to the United States as a teenager in 1961 and received his U.S. citizenship in 1975. "The NMU program is making a huge impact on Nordic skiing in the United States and in the development of elite North American skiers."

That the impact is garnering notice pleases Fjeldheim.

"We have big plans for these two programs and we're ready to pay the consequences for choosing to set our goals high," said Fjeldheim before throwing his hands in the air and adding, "Life is good. Let it snow."

Born to run, born to ski

For most student-athletes, a chance to compete at any NCAA Championship is a feat to hang their careers on. But for NMU juniors Abby Larson and Aubrey Smith, making it to this year's NCAA II Women's Cross Country Championship — their second trip to an NCAA Championship in eight months — is an added bonus to a pair of storied careers in skiing.



Abby Larson



Aubrey Smith

Larson and Smith are two-sport athletes at NMU, participating for both the nationally-ranked Wildcat cross country running and Nordic skiing programs.

Last March, the duo found themselves in Soldier Hollow, Utah, as two of the three women competing for NMU at the 2000 NCAA Skiing Championship. Now the two have participated in a national meet again, running as part of a seven-member squad that represented NMU for the first time in school history at the NCAA II Women's Cross Country Championship on Nov. 18.

Larson and Smith came to Northern to ski, and while training for the sport they love, they've achieved national success in two sports — something most athletes dream of.

Larson walked on to the Wildcat ski team in the fall of 1997. After red-shirting her first year, she has developed into one of NMU's top female skiers, making three trips to the NCAA Skiing Championships. She has earned All-America honors in both classical and freestyle racing in each of the last two seasons, and earned a spot on the U.S. National Team at the 1999 Junior World Championships.

Last season, Larson was the highest-placing American in the NCAA women's Nordic events, finishing 10th in the five-kilometer freestyle and fifth in the 15-kilometer classical races. She has placed among the top 10 in each of her last four races at the NCAA meet.

Smith exploded onto the collegiate ski scene last year and made national headlines, recording the highest finish ever by an American at the Junior World Championships in Slovakia, placing 13th in the five-kilometer freestyle. That accomplishment, coupled with three seventh-place finishes at the U.S. Cross Country Championships, earned her a spot on the U.S. Ski Team's Development Program.

One of three Wildcats to see action in every harrier meet this season, Smith, like Larson, scored in every meet she ran. Six of Smith's seven finishes were in the top 20, including a 19th-place showing at the NCAA II Great Lakes Regional.

Smith finished 36th and Larson finished 81st out of 177 runners at the NCAA II National Championships. NMU finished eighth out of 24 teams with 194 points. NMU freshman Caitlin Compton earned All-American honors for the second straight year as the top finishing Wildcat. She finished 16th with a time of 22.21.2.