

Fiona O’Keefe

National distance star from Davis High School – her next stop is Stanford!

BY BOB BURNS

Fiona O’Keefe’s final cross country and track races at Davis High School couldn’t have been more different, results-wise.

But they’re both part of her legacy as she heads off to Stanford.

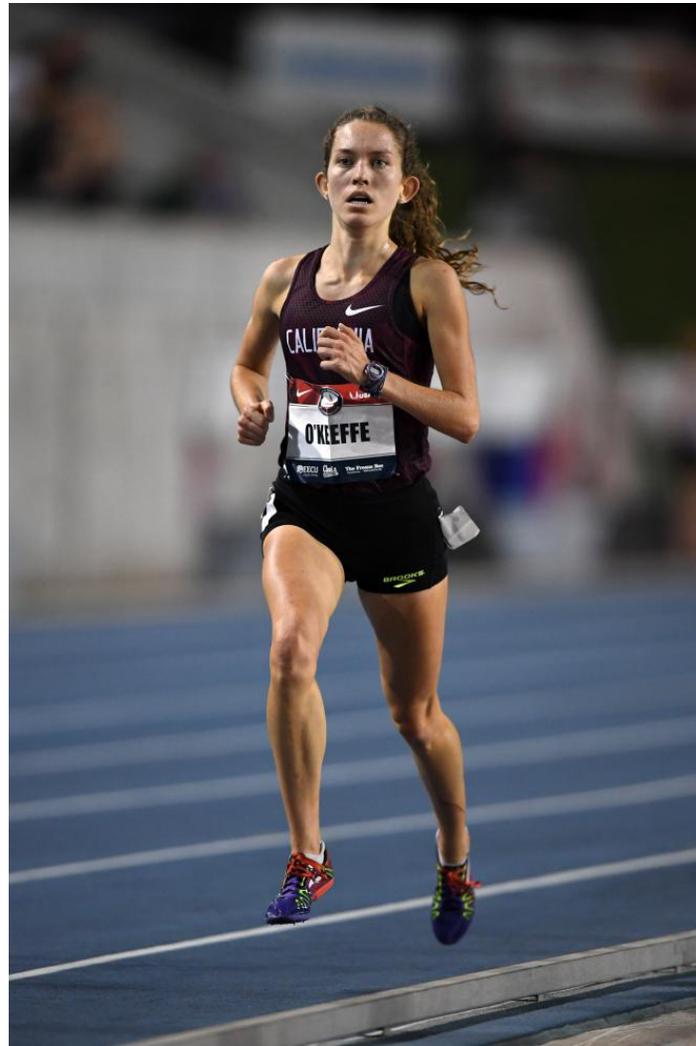
At the 2015 Nike Cross Nationals (NXN) in Portland, Ore., a hobbled O’Keefe struggled to an 85th–place finish. Despite missing nearly two months of her senior cross country season with tendinitis and other leg injuries, she chose to run at the last minute to help her teammates compile the lowest score possible.

Davis High finished second in the team race. Had O’Keefe not run, the Blue Devils would have been fifth.

“She ran for her teammates, not for herself,” Davis coach Bill Gregg said. “It was a heroic effort.”

Conversely, O’Keefe final track race of 2016 resulted in her biggest win to date. She won the 5,000 meters at the USATF Junior Championships in Clovis, Ca., clocking 15:56.84 to become the sixth-fastest female performer in prep history.

O’Keefe outsprinted Anna Rohrer, the sixth-place finisher in the 2015 NCAA cross country championships as a Notre Dame freshman, to qualify for her first U.S. national team.



Fiona O’Keefe on her way to a 5,000m victory (15:56.84) at the 2016 USATF Junior Outdoor Track & Field Championships – *dyestat.com photo*

Erin Dietz of Harvard and Bella Burda led for most of the first half of the USATF race, relieving O’Keefe of her accustomed pacesetting duties. Rohrer threw in a surge at 2,400 meters that O’Keefe covered. On the next-to-last lap, Rohrer opened up a lead of about two seconds, but O’Keefe gained ground on the final backstretch and sprinted to a one-second victory in the final 100 meters.

“Kickers have gotten the best of Fiona in some of her races, so her strong finish with a touch of closing speed was very gratifying to her,” Gregg said.

But instead of joining other members of the U.S. team at the IAAF U20 World Championships July 19-in Bydgoszcz, Poland, O’Keefe decided to call it a season after talking to Gregg and Stanford coach Chris Miltenberg.

“It wasn’t an easy decision,” O’Keefe said. “It’s been a really long season, and my coaches think it’s best to take the longer approach.”

Gregg explained the thinking behind her passing on the trip to Poland.

“Opportunities to make a U.S. team don’t come along very often,” Gregg said. “Fiona, Chris and I discussed the pros and cons of extending her season another month. She stepped back from the excitement of winning her race to reflect on the big picture.

“Ultimately, she felt it was the right choice, but she looks forward to trying to make a U.S. team in the future.”

O’Keefe joins a Stanford distance program that won three straight NCAA women’s cross country titles from 2005 to 2007 but was 14th last year. She considered scholarship offers from Providence, Villanova and Oregon before choosing the distance power closest to her home in Davis.

“I really liked the coaches and the girls on the team,” said O’Keefe, who plans to major in Earth Systems. “I think I would have selected Stanford even if it had been on the other side of the country.”

Her victory at the USATF Junior Championships shows O’Keefe should thrive at the longer distances contested at the collegiate level, according to Stanford’s Miltenberg.

“It’s difficult to say at this point what her best distance will be,” Miltenberg said. “Even if the 10,000 ends up being her best event, as I think it might be, we won’t have her run one of those as a freshman, and possibly not as a sophomore, either. We’ll allow her to fully prepare for the distance.”

O’Keefe’s potential surfaced in junior high school when she shined for the Buffalo Babes club while running fewer than 20 miles a week. She qualified for the state track championships in the 3,200 meters as a Davis freshman in 2013, but it was her win at the

2013 Stanford Invitational cross-country meet that fall that signaled her arrival as a top-tier runner.

“She looked at me like I was crazy when I told her she had a chance to win that race,” Gregg said. “That was the beginning for her in terms of believing she could run with the best.”

O’Keefe won state cross country titles in 2013 and 2014 and was the pre-meet favorite in the 3,200 meters at the California state track meet in 2015. She went to Clovis fresh off a state-leading 10:00.85 to win the Sac-Joaquin Masters title the week before.

But O’Keefe couldn’t stay with Destiny Collins, her friend and rival from Great Oak High School. Despite having placed third in the 1,600 meters a couple of hours earlier, an inspired Collins clocked a blistering 9:53.79 as O’Keefe finished second in 10:01.14.

Memories of that rare defeat made O’Keefe’s victory over Collins in the return match at the 2016 state track meet particularly sweet. O’Keefe won in 10:12.02 as Collins finished nearly 12 seconds back.

“That was definitely one of my goals,” O’Keefe said. “I knew it would be a tough race. I was surprised that I won by as much as I did.”

Despite the loss of his top runner, Gregg’s cupboard is hardly bare at Davis. The Blue Devils return three of the five scorers from the team that placed second at last year’s NXN meet in Portland. One of the returnees is Fiona’s younger sister, Olivia.

Olivia O’Keefe had to be cajoled into following her sister’s footsteps, but the Davis sophomore emerged as a major talent in her own right this spring, running 4:48.66 to place third in the state at 1,600 meters.

“It’s been awesome to see her do so well,” Fiona said of Olivia. “A few years ago, we didn’t think she’d ever get into running.”

Fiona knows that the transition from high school to college is difficult for many prep standouts.

“The biggest difference will be the depth of talent in college,” she said. “I have a lot of trust in my coaches to help me handle the transition.”

Rest assured, she’ll be welcomed with open arms.

“We’re really excited about getting Fiona on campus,” Miltenberg said. “I think she has the potential to be one of the best runners in the NCAA and the U.S. over the next five to seven years. We’ll take a very patient, long-term approach with her development.”