

Ali Clark is racing toward officiating career

Written by Vinny Benedetto
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A snowstorm that rocked the East Coast in 2010 may have served as the starting gun of the track and field officiating career of Gothenburg's Ali Clark.

With the troublesome weather, some officials were unable to travel to a USA Indoor Championship meet in Albuquerque, NM. Ali's father, Jim Clark, was already planning on working the event, and a day out of school was the only enticement the then high school senior needed to join.

"Honestly, I didn't even know what I was getting into," Clark said. "My dad just said 'We're skipping school,' and when he said we're missing school, I said 'I'm in.' "

She was put to use, checking in athletes and was able to experience a meet from a different perspective. The most beneficial moment of her first event as a worker was an introduction she hardly remembers.

Dennis Olafson is a key cog in the Eugene, OR, track and field machine. He owns more than 40 years of experience and has been a staple at the University of Oregon's Hayward Field for decades.

Unfortunately for Track Town, USA, his career is nearing the finish line. In 2012 he stepped down from two administrative positions so he could spend more time actually officiating.

"The reason that track has gone there (Eugene) is because of this gentleman, Dennis Olafson" Jim Clark said. "He's the brains behind it all."

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With the end of his days as a track official approaching, Olafson decided it was time to pass down some of his valuable knowledge.

Olafson had never welcomed an understudy, but by November of 2013, the time had come. He ran into Jim Clark at a convention and remembered his daughter from the meet in Albuquerque, although Ali could not say the same. Olafson asked Clark if he thought his daughter might like to do an apprenticeship. Without consulting his daughter, Clark accepted on her behalf.

“He didn’t ask me. He basically told me,” Ali said.

“I pretty much told Ali she would be doing this,” her father admitted. “The reason is that this is a very special deal.

By Jim Clark’s estimate, most high-level track officials are men in their late 60s. Olafson wants to make sure the next round is ready to fill in. That led the longtime official to invite Ali to follow in his footsteps at the 2014 NCAA Division I Outdoor Championships in the American mecca of track and field, Eugene.

“I had to crack up because they absolutely rolled out the red carpet. Now, I know what goes on behind the scenes at these meets, and Ali, of course, is just getting shown everything,” Jim Clark said.

“She would tell me at the end of each day all the different places she got to see, and I’m like ‘You have no idea. No one ever gets to see that stuff.’ ”

While Ali networked and helped with the pole vault one day, her primary responsibility was to follow Olafson around and absorb much of what makes him unique. Jim described the veteran official as a guy that “solves problems before they start.”

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The only complaint Ali had about her experience was the gloomy, rainy weather of the Pacific Northwest.

“It was very worthwhile and I’m very grateful I had that opportunity to do it,” she said. “I guess now the goal is just to get him to come out and work my meet.”

Ali Clark may not be able to bring Olafson to the Nebraska Championship, a state-wide junior high meet held in town, but she will apply many of his lessons.

“Their ability to run meet management is second to none,” Jim said.

“That’s why we copied it and brought it here,” Ali added.

Ali works as the officials coordinator at the Nebraska Championship and has held various positions in numerous other meets. Although most officials are only paid with behind-the-scenes access and memories, it’s something Ali Clark will continue to do for the foreseeable future.

She hopes to advance to a paid position but has a back-up plan in the meantime. Clark will soon begin her senior year at Nebraska-Kearney where she is majoring in resort management and marketing.

The best way to prepare for such a job is experience, according to the Clarks. Ali’s been on the track in some fashion since she was 3 years old, and has worked meets since 2010. Jim claims his daughter has “knowledge beyond her years.”

While she may be fresh out of the starting blocks in her officiating career, she has a pretty good idea of where she’ll finish.

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“The thing I enjoy most is I get to learn all this stuff, but some day I’ll be one of the official coordinators,” Clark said.

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