

# Cat great Holman coaching foothills talent

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**Sonora Wildcat Hall of Fame runner Darren Holman is coaching the newly-established Foothill Track and Running Club. Vongni Yang / Union Democrat**

**By VONGNI YANG**

*The Union Democrat*

Darren Holman never lost a Valley Oak League race as a long-distance runner while at Sonora High School.

He dominated the youth running circuit. He ran cross-country and track and still holds numerous Wildcat and county records, including the mile and 1500-meter. He is a recent member of the Wildcat Hall of Fame.

"He's one of the greatest distance runners in the history of Sonora High School," said Sonora athletic director Rick Francis. "He kind of set the tone for future generations."

His standout prep days earned him a full-ride scholarship to Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo in the central coast of California. There, Holman said that he had a "decent college career." But he was still among some of the top distance runners in the west and nation.

In 1999, he finished eighth in the mile at the USA Indoor National Championships in Atlanta, and he captured the 5000-meter Big West Conference Championship.

"My five years at Cal Poly, I trained everyday." Holman said. "We trained up to 100 miles a week."

After completing college and earning his Bachelor's Degree in political science, Holman decided to pursue his dream of representing the United States of America in the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece.

That dream brought him to Palo Alto, and he trained year-round with the Nike farm team from 2000-03. It wasn't easy training with the best distance runners in the country. He had to stay focused and committed, and that meant sacrificing.

"Running is not something that happens overnight," Holman said. "There isn't no good or bad day. Either you're in shape or you're not."

So he trained and ran, and did it all over again. Everyday. For three years.

And that strain of more than a decade of running and training competitively at the highest level finally caught up to him.

Three months before Olympic trials an unfortunate injury sidelined Holman — a sprained ankle with torn ligaments. He was expected to miss two to three months. That dream of running on an Olympic track came to an end.

"The only goal was to run in Olympic trials," Holman said. "And hopefully see where that led to, but that was the goal — to run the trials."

So, he stopped running. Completely. He lost that drive to train and compete after the injury. Holman ran out of fuel in his tank and was running on empty.

Exhausted mentally and physically, he made the decision to walk away from the sport that had provided him with so much opportunities. It was time to start real life.

"I had other priorities," Holman said. "I stopped running. It was an emotional strain — didn't watch running on TV, no track and field. I was completely out of the loop."

"Didn't take a step in 10 years."

For a decade, there were no inspirations for him to get back on the track. No motivation to compete. Until now.

And it's not the same driving force that bounced him around from Sonora to Cal Poly and to Palo Alto and back. This time, the urge to step into the distance running world again is in the competitive drive and faces of children.

**Thirteen-year-old Cassi Land** had been looking for stiffer competition in the Sonora area after she won MVP honors at the county track meet in May 2012. When she couldn't find anyone who could beat her locally, her parents took her on a trip to Tulare in the San Joaquin Valley to compete in a higher-profile meet — to see how they would stack up against runners from a different area.

Land did well, she won both of the events that she competed in, and another local runner Jackson McIlroy did the same. While at the meet, Jackson's father Paul McIlroy noticed that there were many runners affiliated with club teams.

So, Paul McIlroy asked around and came to the conclusion that he wanted to field and start a club team of his own. All he needed to do was pay a \$79 registration fee, pass a background check and fill out a form with USA Track and Field. And just like that, the Foothill Gold Track and Running club was born in fall 2012, and he became manager.

But the club was still without a qualified coach. Paul McIlroy initially trained the group, but he knew he would not be doing justice to his young athletes because he did not know much about the sport. McIlroy had an athletic background. He attended Fresno State on a 75 percent scholarship as a water polo player and swimmer. His expertise was in aquatics.

Knowing he couldn't train a runner like Land, who really wanted to pursue running in the Junior Olympics, he reconnected with a someone from his past.

"I called a good friend of mine from 10 years ago," McIlroy said. "It was Darren."

**At first, Darren Holman**, now Vice Principal at Sierra Conservation College and Director of Welding Technology at Columbia College, was reluctant to take the task as coach. He knew how grueling it is as a youth runner. Holman, as a kid, ran in the Junior Olympics and finished in second place as a fifth grader. He made consecutive trips three years in a row.

He understood the toll running can take on a young mind and body, but he also knew the benefits it paid.

"Running is the reason why I was so successful in college as I am right now," Holman said. "Running not only gave me the ability to go to college, it also gave me the incentive to keep my grades up. It pushed me through. I give all of the credit to running and the associates that are in running — gave me a great start and great guidance."

So he promised McIlroy that he would drop by practice once a week in January.

"I saw the talent, and knew this was for me," Holman said.

Once a week turned into three days a week.

"Now, I am so fortunate to give back to the community," Holman said. "Running is a great way to give back. We are giving them the ability and the coaching to be able to compete against the best."

Since Holman took control, the team has flourished.

Land, who will be an eighth grader this fall, is ranked fifth in her age bracket by USA Track and Field, Holman said.

Just this past weekend, the team traveled to the bay area and seven runners from the club qualified for the final round before nationals.

"It's amazing the talent that we have," Holman said. "They're really good."