On Campus

Bierbaum Named NCAA’s Top Female Cross-Country Runner

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Caroline Bierbaum ’06CC became the most decorated female cross-country athlete in Columbia’s history this year. And she did it her own, quiet way.

Bierbaum, who is known for her easygoing temperament on and off the race course, placed second in the cross-country national championships last November at Indiana State University. That made her eligible — along with the other top four finishers — for the prestigious Honda Award, presented every year to the most outstanding female athlete in each of 12 NCAA-sanctioned sports.“It’s the equivalent of winning the Heisman Trophy in college football,” says Willy Wood, the women’s cross-country head coach.

Bierbaum didn’t think she stood a chance at winning the award, especially since she’d been beaten rather handily at Terre Haute by rival Johanna Nilsson of Northern Arizona University. “The Honda usually goes to the winner of the national championship,” explains Bierbaum, who grew up on Manhattan’s Upper East Side.

But that would be ignoring Bierbaum’s remarkable success streak during the past 18 months. In that period, she won two Ivy League championships, shattering a 23-year track record at the most recent heptagonal showdown while leading the Lions to a fourth straight team title.The five-time All American was also the only runner among the top four at this year’s national championship who finished in the top four at last year’s championship, in which she placed third. Moreover, Bierbaum has had to overcome serious health issues to be racing at all; she was sidelined for most of the 2003 season by iron defi- ciency and rejoined the team mid-season last year.

The NCAA athletic administrators voting for the Honda Awards were impressed. In January they honored Bierbaum as the nation’s most outstanding female crosscountry athlete.“I guess this is a testament to my consistency,” says the history major and aspiring journalist.“It’s a great honor.”

A self-described “homebody and running dork” who always hits the sack by 11 p.m., Bierbaum says that patience has brought her success. “I take a low-key approach to everything,” she laughs.“On the race course, I want to be near the front, but generally not in the lead. This sport is mental as well as physical, and leading the race is more taxing in both respects.You want to be able to see your competitors and to save your strength — for exactly the right time.”



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