

## Junior Mavericks Running Club teaches kids the joy of running through student mentors, top coaches and fun

BY KAREN BILLING

The kids of the Junior Mavericks Running Club were kicking up dust on the Diegueno Middle School track recently, a big mix of ages finding their happy pace.

A 7-year-old matched the long strides of a mentor college runner with a smile on her face, and a pack of middle-school girls found a way to giggle and jog at the same time. One middle-school boy blazed the track in an all-out sprint, pumping his arms in the correct technique that Coach Robin had instructed.

The Junior Mavericks Running Club, in the thick of its summer season, aims to build stronger runners, tweak technique, enhance endurance and teach an overall enjoyment of running that can last a lifetime.

Junior Mavericks was founded by Coach Robin Missailidis, the Diegueno Middle School cross country and track team coach since 2006, and Laura Stuart-Platenberg, a masters athlete sponsored by PowerBar. Platenberg used to run marathons but now the mother of four focuses on the more time-management-friendly 5Ks and 10Ks.

Missailidis has been an athlete her entire life, mostly tennis and softball. But she has become a cyclist in her adult life — she rides every year in the California Coast Classic Bicycle Tour, a 525-mile ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles. She met Stuart-Platenberg in a swimming pool as she was training for a triathlon.

The running club was inspired, Missailidis said, “because parents wanted it locally. Every time the season would end, a parent would ask if I could do extra sessions.”

It started as just a summer club, but this year Missailidis formalized it as a business and asked her friend Stuart-Platenberg to help.

About 40 boys and girls, ages 16 and younger, regularly show up for twice-weekly workouts. Whether they are elementary-age students being introduced to running or middle-school runners trying to stay competitive or prepare for high school, the club offers effective workouts.

The club runs in six-week sessions, during the layoffs between cross country and track seasons. In the spring, they tend to focus more on the mile for track, and in the fall, they build the mileage a bit for the cross-country distance.

The community and camaraderie of the group plays a big role in helping kids develop a love for running.

“My daughter met a lot of really nice friends, and that’s when she started liking it,” said Stuart-Platenberg, noting at first that her youngest was reluctant to tag along to practices. “They see that it’s fun to run with their friends, and that running makes them feel good.”

The high school students mentor the younger kids, and everyone is motivated by the kid one step ahead of them.

The kids even influence the parents watching from the stands, who are motivated to get back into shape. Missailidis said they have had parent run nights where moms and dads can join in.

“The beautiful thing about the club is that a lot of kids have gone on to become successful athletes in high school and college,” Missailidis said.



The Junior Mavericks Running Club. Photos by Karen Billing



This summer, the program benefited from three college talents: Steven Fahy, a recent La Costa Canyon grad who will run for Stanford in the fall; Ellie Abrahamson, an LCC grad and sophomore runner at Wake Forest; and Anne Charles, a Canyon Crest Academy grad who will run at Cornell in the fall.

Three high school students are also helping out this summer: Molly Mineiro, Sarah Abrahamson and Steven Terris, all LCC students who came through Missailidis’ Diegueno teams.

Molly, a senior at La Costa Canyon, started running under Coach Robin as an eighth-grader at Diegueno. Getting moving as a middle schooler gave her a head start and helped her realize running was a sport she wanted to commit to in high school. She now runs cross country and the distance events of 3200 and 1600 in track and field at La Costa Canyon.

“I love running, and it’s inspiring in a way to see little kids want to come out here and exercise and do something good and healthy for them,” Molly said.

Molly and the rest of the mentors were busy last week, leading groups around the track doing drills, running alongside the youngsters at their shorter-legged pace, offering words of encouragement.

“We kind of give it to the mentors in the summer,” Missailidis said. “They just enjoy it, and the younger kids love them.”

Steven Fahy and Steven Terris took a group off the track and into the neighborhood for

a longer trek. The off-road course is often used as a celebratory run at the end of the six-week training schedule as the kids run to Village Park’s 7-Eleven for Slurpee treats.

The club also trains for races such as the Encinitas Youth Cross Country Invitational on Aug. 30, a race for 5- to 14-year-olds on the grounds of the old Olivenhain Meeting Hall. Several club members also competed June 5 at the Jim Ryun Festival of Miles at Balboa Stadium, commemorating the 50th anniversary of Ryun’s feat of becoming the first high school boy to run a sub-four-minute mile.

The Junior Mavs had a great showing — McKenna Brown placed second in the middle-school girls division and Gavin Ailshire placed second in the middle-school boys division. McKenna, who went to Oak Crest Middle School, and Gavin, who went to Diegueno Middle School, will both attend LCC in the fall. Both were out leading the youngsters on runs and drills this summer.

At the end of some workouts, the coaches select a “PowerBar Athlete of the Day.” The honorees are not always the fastest runners, but are always children who accomplished something they thought they couldn’t do.

“You don’t have to be the fastest; it really doesn’t matter,” said Stuart-Platenberg. “The kids will cheer on the slower runners, and there’s a lot less stress than the other sports that they get involved with.”

For more on the club, visit [junior Mavericks.com](http://junior Mavericks.com).

## Opening Day Style at Del Mar

Del Mar’s racing season kicked off in style once again with one of the area’s biggest social events, Opening Day on July 17. It’s a feast for the eyes, from the colorful parade of fancy hats and jockey silks, to celebrity sightings. Not to mention parties that took place everywhere, on and off the track, all day long and well into the evening.

The centerpiece of the seaside oval’s celebration was the Opening Day Hats Contest, now in its 20th year. Officially established in 1995 by Julie Sarno as “The One and Only Truly Fabulous Hats Contest,” it brings out the most serious of hat aficionados, who spend months perfecting their headgear for prestige and prizes.

This year’s categories were Best Racing Theme, Funniest/Most Outrageous, Most Glamorous, Best Flowers/All Others and Best Fascinator. Photos by Jon Clark. For more photos online, visit [www.delmartimes.net](http://www.delmartimes.net).



Charlotte Ginsburg



Amber Thorne



Richard Polacheck



Janita Salazar, Sheila Trisler, Amparo Brean, Shevon Brean