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Cross country team earns national academic honors

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

In recognition of its academic achievements, the Women's Intercollegiate Cross Country Coaches Association (WICCCA) named Oakland University's **women's cross country** team a 2003 Academic All-American Team. In addition, the WICCCA named senior runner **Kristie Kieffer** a 2003 Academic All-America, the first OU runner ever to receive such an honor.

Oakland's 3.34 team grade point average placed it second among the three Mid-Continent Conference teams on the list and fourth among the seven Division I schools from Michigan that also earned the honor. All teams that earned a 3.25 or higher GPA were designated as a team "with distinction."

"I'm very proud of the team and Kristie," said cross country coach Paul Rice. "The team has received this honor in the past, but this is the first time we've been designated a team 'with distinction.' It's also exciting to receive the official word from the coaches association about Kristie. The fact that she competed at nationals is a testament to her good year, but being named Academic All-American is a testament to her entire college career."

Kieffer, a finance major with a 3.29 GPA, became the first OU runner to compete at the U.S. National Cross Country Championships in February. She also was named Mid-Con Student-Athlete of the Month last September, another first for an Oakland runner.

"Everyone worked really hard this year at meets and in class and we accomplished a lot of goals," Kieffer said. "A lot of our girls also did very well personally, and I was also really pleased to make it to nationals. That's been my goal for the past few years. Overall, we have a lot of smart hard-working people on the team and we had a really good season."

It's said that success breed success, and in the case of the cross country team, the academic and athletic achievements of runners like Kieffer motivate her teammates to push their limits.

"Kristie has definitely paved the way for others who look up to her accomplishments," Rice said. "When I became head coach seven years ago, we had about eight people on each cross country team. Since then, we've managed to grow the team and keep the academic standards high.

"There's a kind of good pressure exerted on our athletes that makes them want to perform better. During competition when one person needs help, the rest of the team tries to pick them up. It's the same thing with academics. Our team has a good support system in place."

The cross country teams help one another with their class work by meeting regularly for study sessions, tutoring one another, recommending certain classes or teachers, or taking classes together.

"We have seniors and juniors that tutor the underclassmen on the team. They do a nice job of pooling their resources. This also makes the upperclassmen feel good about helping our younger athletes out," Rice said. "The teams also tend to have similar interests and majors, and there always seems to be at least one person on the team who can help someone out with a class if they need it. They have their own study habits and meet in small groups together. It's not unusual to walk through the library or Oakland Center and see groups of them sitting together studying."

Rice monitors his athletes' academic standing by meeting regularly with Keith Merritt, athletic adviser in OU's Advising Resource Center.

"I spend extra time with Keith to make sure everything is in place," Rice said. "The NCAA is very strict about enforcing satisfactory academic progress, and I work closely with Keith to make sure our athletes are doing that. There's nothing

worse than having a healthy athlete who can't compete because they haven't progressed academically. This has never happened to us, and we avoid it by double- and triple-checking the status of our athletes."

Though it may seem more difficult for a student-athlete to maintain high academic standards while meeting the demands of regular practices and meets, Rice said the athletic discipline actually helps students meet this challenge.

"Our team practices sometimes wear out our athletes, and there's a tendency for them to want to go home afterwards and take a nap. But they need to have the discipline of eating and sleeping properly to be able to focus and concentrate," Rice said. "These habits for success also carry over into the classroom. In a way, the student-athlete has an advantage over other students because of the disciplined habits they demonstrate in their sport.

"We always like to boast about Oakland's academic reputation to our recruits and their parents. This gives them a little more reassurance that there's plenty of opportunity for our student-athletes to succeed in the classroom. Oakland doesn't just have athletes – they're student-athletes who all share the same goal of graduating with honors."

For more information on Oakland University's men's and women's cross country teams, visit the [OU Athletics Web site](#).

SUMMARY

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