

It's possible, her coach believes, that Shannon could be a contender for the U.S. Olympic team for 1984 in Los Angeles, at age 13. A long shot perhaps, but for now, running is the most important part of life for Shannon Clark.



Mountain View's Shannon Clark: best American runner in her age group?

Future Olympian?

Shannon Clark might be tiny, but she's a champion runner

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MOUNTAIN VIEW — She's tiny, 4-foot-6½, 60 pounds. She's skinny, looks oh so frail, as if a strong gust of wind could carry her away.

But don't be fooled. She's an athlete, a state champion — maybe the best in the nation for her age, maybe a future Olympian.

She's Shannon Clark, 10 years old, distance runner, state 10-11 age-group cross country champion, surprisingly strong and fast. Her times could place her in high-school meets.

Generally smaller and a year younger than the girls she competes against, Shannon won the cross-country title last month in Los Angeles, beating the 10-11 national 1,500-meter champion, 800-meter champion and '78 cross-country champion.

"She's easily the best 10-year-old and probably the best 10-11 runner in the country now," says her coach, Mel Ho of the Arrow Track Club in Los Altos.

Lack of funds prevented her from proving that for now at the recent cross-country nationals in North Carolina, but her past times and races give credence to her coach's beliefs.

In the summer of 1978, at age 9, she ran 5:17 to win her age-group 1,500-meter state championship. That was second best in the nation. She's clearly faster than that now. One of the girls she beat at the state cross-country meet this year had run 4:50.9 in the 1,500. At the recent "Stanford Great Race" she was 12-under champ, with a time of 39:33.20 for 10,000 meters.

In races late last summer, Ho clocked her at 5:20 for the mile, equivalent to about a 4:50 1,500, and in the low 2:20s for the 880. He figures she'll be down to the 4:40s for the 1,500 next spring.

What makes Shannon Clark so good? Heredity is part of it. Her father, former Stanford cross-country and assistant track coach Marshall Clark,

was an All-American track man. From him she got her long legs and stride. "She's built to run," says Ho.

But, as the old cliché goes, ability can only carry you so far. There must be desire, too. And Shannon is an intense competitor who hates to lose. She says simply: "I like to beat people."

She also (remember this is a 10-year-old) has a remarkable ability to run tactical races. With her coach she goes over courses before a race, plans where to run hard, where to recover and knows how to judge an opponent.

Stanford women's track coach Laurel Treon says there's "no question" as to Shannon's talent. Her time at the "Great Race" was "pretty phenomenal." "And we know her father was a good runner . . . it's exciting . . . there could be the genetic (factor), and I was impressed by her very positive attitude and dedication. She could have a very special potential."

At the state cross-country meet Shannon and Ho mapped a strategy where she attacked on the hills in hopes of burning out the field in the 1½-mile race. She started her kick on an uphill, a half-mile from the finish.

The easy conclusion is that Shannon Clark is not a normal little girl, blessed as both an athlete and with intelligence. That's true — but only partially.

She is a paradox: a child, a normal sixth grader — ready to giggle and play with her twin sister Stacy. "I like school for my friends but not for the books," she says.

There's adult in her, too, especially when it comes to running. While not likely to discuss the trouble in Iran, she has some awfully adult attitudes and can express herself well. Boys are nice, she says, admitting to a boyfriend with whom she runs, "but boys and running, that's two different things."

You get the impression that her child-adult mix makes her a better runner in that the child in her ignores the physical stress of running but the

adult in her gives her that tactical edge.

Her mother Beverly Clark says, "Maybe the running tends to make them (Shannon and Stacy) more grown up and responsible. But she's still a little girl, very immature physically."

Shannon says she runs, "because our dad got us into it (four years ago). I like it because it's fun."

Shannon and her coach have a unique relationship, too. Ho, a former triple jumper at Stanford and UCLA, worries a lot about making it fun for his kids. Shannon never runs more than 15 miles a week (in three workouts) or more than one meet a week. Ho says he tries to mix in "fun" workouts, such as runs in the hills. He buys his kids Cokes, takes them to movies.

For Shannon and Stacy, who also competes for Arrow, he's become something of a surrogate father since the twins and their mother moved back to the Bay Area from Montana, where their father is now head track coach and assistant athletic director at the University of Montana.

(They were gone from the area almost a year, causing Shannon to miss this past summer track season, although she won the Montana state cross-country championship for her age group and a similar mountain region Junior Olympics title.)

"He's not just my coach," Shannon says of Ho. "It's like we're friends. He makes it a lot easier. He's younger than most coaches (23). It's like he's still a kid."

The key, says Ho, is to let the kids still be kids, not work them too much, keep their season short and their interest high, avoid their becoming mentally tired.

Shannon, naturally, has it all figured out. First high school, then college ("I want to go to Stanford"), and some day the Olympics, in the 1,500.

"The other girls are bigger and stronger and you don't have to have a whole bunch of strength (for the 1,500)," she says.

Examples:

The best part of her day: "Running."

The movie she most wants to see: "Running," even though I hear it's a bomb."

But don't forget, "Boys and running, that's two different things."