

Sample 1.

[Revisiting SU's men's cross country national championship 10 years later](#)

Syracuse cross country's 2015 national championship squad will be recognized in the JMA Wireless Dome Saturday, 10 years after the Orange captured the title.

By Aidan Tseng

Justyn Knight crossed the finish line, unsure of the result. It was a November afternoon, and Knight was representing Syracuse at the 2015 NCAA Division I Cross Country Championships in Louisville, Kentucky.

After he crossed the finish line, Knight was quickly pulled into an interview. But his mind was racing. From afar, SU's best runner saw his teammates and coaches huddled up as they awaited the announcement. He desperately wanted to join them.

"Did we win? Did we not do it?" Knight thought to himself.

The anticipation ate at him. Midway through the interview, he saw everyone start screaming. Syracuse had done it.

After making the NCAA Championships in the previous six seasons, never getting over the hump, the Orange had captured their first national championship in 64 years. A decade later, the 2015 title is still the crowning moment in the program's ascension to elite status.

Now, the seven runners Syracuse brought to Louisville — Knight, Colin Bennie, Martin Hehir, Philo Germano, Joel Hubbard, Dan Lennon and Joseph Kush — will be celebrated on Saturday for the 10th anniversary during SU's football game against Duke.

"People will forget and it'll fade into time, and that's all fine and dandy, but we'll never forget," Hehir said. "We'll still be talking about it when we're old."

But heading into the meet, Syracuse was far from a shoo-in for the title.

During his recruiting process, Lennon's high school coach weighed in on his decision. Because of the Orange's mediocre track record in the late 20th century, he told Lennon not to commit there.

Lennon ignored his coach's advice, citing the program's rapid growth under head coach Chris Fox.

And after Hubbard — who he already knew from high school races — committed to the Orange, Lennon foreshadowed the championship win to his future teammate.

“Hey, in 2015, who knows?” Lennon said to Hubbard. “We could be NCAA cross country champions.”

Fox continued to fill out his roster and coaching staff after nabbing Lennon and Hubbard. In the summer of 2012, he added assistant coach Adam Smith to his staff.

Smith was previously an assistant coach at North Carolina after an illustrious collegiate career with the Tar Heels. He saw the writing on the wall after UNC head coach Dennis Craddock retired, so he left Chapel Hill. He landed a job at Dartmouth after Fox connected him with its coach. So, when an assistant role for the Orange later opened, Smith said he took it and ran.

When Smith arrived for the 2012 season, Syracuse appeared in three consecutive national championships, but it never finished above 14th. SU already had talented runners like Hehir, Kush and Lennon from the previous year. Hehir stood out among the rest, winning the Big East Championships as a freshman.

But Fox and Smith wanted to surround him with more top runners. They emphasized gathering the best recruits in the region. Five of the seven runners who ran in the 2015 national championship were from New York. Before the 2013 season, SU also got freshman commitments from Bennie, a Massachusetts native, and Germano from Albany.

“(Germano) was a guy who I recruited from the start,” Smith said. “He had made Footlocker, he made Nike Nationals, but was just a kid who you could tell there was something special about him.”

The main exception was Knight, one of the most decorated recruits to ever pick the Orange. Knight, a native of Vaughan, Ontario, was already the Canadian Jr. Cross Country Champion and went undefeated as a high school senior.

Fox and his staff didn't recruit beyond their region often, but they knew breaking the informal rules for Knight would be worthwhile. Fox and Smith teamed up to try and sign Knight, and they successfully did ahead of the 2014 season.

“He’s the best recruit that Syracuse will ever have,” Smith said.

After signing top recruits and maintaining a strong core of upperclassmen, Syracuse dominated the 2014 season. The Orange finished first in the Wisconsin Meet of Champions, ACC Championships and NCAA Northeast Regional.

While they entered the 2014 NAAs as the second-best team in the nation, they ultimately finished fifth and watched Colorado claim the crown for the second straight year. Syracuse simply couldn’t handle the pressure.

“We showed up and basically laid an egg,” Hubbard said. “It was like, ‘Whoa, maybe we weren’t ready for that.’”

Despite falling short, the Orange knew they’d have high expectations in 2015, with plenty of talent planning to return. Five of its seven runners from 2015 also ran in the championships the year before.

“All of a sudden we’re going, ‘Hey, if we think that we underperformed by a significant margin and we’re fifth, that bodes well,’” Bennie said. “Leaving Indiana in 2014, we all were already starting to think about November 2015.”

Just under a year later, they got their chance at redemption. After sweeping the Wisconsin Adidas Invitational, ACC Championships and NCAA Northeast Regional, the Orange entered the NCAA Championship desperately hoping to defeat Colorado, who had returned most of its roster.

“If they had done a College Game Day set for NCAA (cross country), every single analyst would have picked Colorado,” Hubbard said.

On that windy autumn afternoon, Knight set the tone, scoring third place. Bennie and Hehir finished close behind, taking seventh and eighth, respectively. Germano claimed 29th, then Hubbard placed 35th. Lennon (51st) and Kush (99th) capped off the event for Syracuse.

At the NCAA Championships, standings are determined by the roster’s average time. With an average time of 30:08.50, the Orange barely topped the Buffaloes’ average of 30:10.20, giving them the win and avenging their disappointment from 2014.

For Hehir, Kush and Lennon, it was the last time they raced for Syracuse. Kush was a fifth-year, which meant even more to him.

“I had no regrets, but it would have been like, ‘Damn, I grind it so hard five years every day, run my ass off, and we got fourth.’”

The win catapulted Syracuse into national recognition. From 1974 to 2009, Syracuse went 35 years without competing at NCAAs. Now, the Orange have raced in the season’s final event for 16 consecutive seasons, the fourth-longest active streak.

“It was just cool to change that culture slowly by getting more and more guys to buy in,” Kush said. “We went from nothing to an amazing team, and now they’ve sustained that excellence, which is all you can hope for.”

Kush, like many of his former teammates, keeps tabs on the program. The 2015 team still texts regularly and often reunites through weddings or occasional meet-ups. They’ll all be together on Saturday in the Dome.

All seven runners have committed to attending. Knight, still a professional runner and Olympian, is coming from Oregon. Bennie, Germano and Hubbard are traveling from the Boston area. Hehir and Kush are coming from Virginia, while Lennon is coming from Albany.

Nearly a decade later, they’re still travelling great lengths for Syracuse, the program that gave them one of their fondest memories.

Sample 2.

[Nikki Shimao's Temple connections helped Syracuse feel like home](#)

Already familiar with SU's coaching staff due to her time at Temple, Nikki Shimao has brought a spark to the Orange in 2024.

By Aidan Tseng

In 2021, Nikki Shimao arrived at Temple's practice just like any other day. At the time, she was a sophomore walk-on. Little did she know that then-Owls head coach Bakeer Ganesharatnam would reveal in front of the whole team that she'd be going on scholarship.

Shimao broke down to tears. She thought about her parents, who allowed her to move cross-country as a walk-on and all the hard work she'd put in at a new position in a new environment.

"Nikki is an unbelievable hard worker," Ganesharatnam said. "She truly earned her scholarship, and I was really happy at that time that we had this scholarship available and that we were able to award that to somebody like her."

Despite being 5,000 miles away from her hometown of Honolulu, Hawaii, Shimao found a home in north Philadelphia. The setter/defensive specialist became a crucial part of Temple's roster, playing in 240 sets, with 464 digs and 179 assists stats over four seasons. This past offseason, Shimao transferred to Syracuse, reuniting with Ganesharatnam for her fifth and final season of eligibility.

Shimao arrived on Temple's campus in July 2020. Though she was a long way from home, Temple had a history of recruiting other Hawaiians like Nikki Saito, Falankia Danielson and Xeryah Salanoa, who were already on the team, aiding her decision.

Initially recruited as a defensive specialist, Shimao was forced to play setter during her freshman year. She constantly took extra reps passing to the middle blockers as she learned the new position.

Taylor Davenport, another member of Temple's 2020 recruiting class, got to see Shimao's development firsthand, working as a setter with her. The two lived together for three years and spent numerous hours with each other. Shimao even hosted Davenport in Hawaii during a summer break.

“I feel like we all just grew so much and we relied on each other a lot,” Davenport said. “I learned a lot from her. She learned a lot. We just learned a lot as we navigated college together.”

After her senior year, Shimao entered the transfer portal looking for a new challenge.

When Shimao entered the portal, Syracuse didn’t have much depth at libero — Shimao’s position. Then-freshman Greta Schlichter was the only libero on SU’s roster along with incoming freshmen Ashlee Gnau and Emma Ortiz. Lacking depth and experience, Ganesharatnam was eager to add a familiar face.

“Once Nikki graduated and she was in the portal, I was really happy to see her name and we knew that she’s going to help us in the libero position,” Ganesharatnam said. “We knew what she was able to do for us at Temple when we had the opportunity to work together, and we wanted to create more depth in that position.”

With Syracuse, Shimao was drawn to the opportunity to play in the highly-competitive Atlantic Coast Conference. Shimao’s familiarity with its coaching staff was another major part of her decision. SU assistant coach Akiko Hatakeyama, who also coached Shimao at Temple, reached out to her last December, asking if she wanted to visit Syracuse. Once Shimao visited campus, it heightened her desire to transfer.

“Seeing (Hatakeyama and Ganesharatnam) for the first time in years, and the campus, I was immediately drawn toward (Syracuse),” Shimao said.

Following the visit, Shimao discussed transferring to SU with her family in Hawaii before making the decision official.

“I took my time to go home and think about it ... and (my family was) really excited about it. So I would say the visit really helped,” Shimao said.

Prior to the season, Ganesharatnam named Shimao one of SU’s three captains. The third-year head coach described Shimao as a seasoned veteran who brought stability to the libero position, something Syracuse didn’t have previously.

“Having (Shimao) is completely different because she’s a very experienced player. (She’s) a player that can help younger players, guide them, sit down with them, have conversations with them, explain to them what she went through,” Ganesharatnam said. “She brings a completely

different wealth of experience, a completely different value to the program than she did when she came in as a freshman to Temple.”

For Shimao, she hasn’t seen any differences in how Ganesharatnam operates at SU from his time at Temple. Fundamentally, the goals are the same.

To start the season, Shimao missed all 12 of Syracuse’s nonconference games due to injury but has gotten into a groove since late September. She’s played 56 sets in 16 games for Orange, amassing 87 digs and 11 assists. Her consistency at libero has been crucial for SU.

Ganesharatnam described her as a tenacious defender and a great passer, a skill she learned as a setter her freshman year.

“I can’t really say enough of the value she brings to our program,” Ganesharatnam said.

Sample 3.

['Invisible No More' highlights Wilmeth Sidat-Singh's lasting impact at SU](#)

Wilmeth Sidat-Singh was the first-ever Black football player at Syracuse.

By Aidan Tseng

Scott Pitoniak and Rick Burton met in 2008, when Pitoniak was speaking at Syracuse about his book “Memories of Yankee Stadium.” Burton — a professor at SU’s Falk College — brought his entire honors class to listen to Pitoniak. After the event, the two instantly hit it off, connecting over their love of all things Syracuse.

More than five years later, Pitoniak found out about Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, the first Black football player at Syracuse. He reached out to Burton and realized how little coverage there was of him, despite his historic feats. That was when the two decided to write a book about Sidat-Singh’s accomplishments.

Sidat-Singh was a Syracuse quarterback and basketball player in the 1930s, more than 10 years before famous Black pioneers of sports integrated the game. Now, 90 years after Sidat-Singh attended SU, Pitoniak and Burton retold his story through their new historical fiction book “Invisible No More,” which was published on Dec. 5, 2023. The story details the trouble Sidat-Singh dealt with as a Black athlete, including not being allowed to play in multiple games in certain states.

Despite being the first Black football player ever at Syracuse, he’s relatively unknown to the public. Pitoniak and Burton are looking to bring awareness to the historical athlete through their book, providing insight to who they both call “the greatest athlete you’ve never heard of.”

Syracuse is known for Black football players who helped break barriers like Ernie Davis and Jim Brown. But Sidat-Singh came before them and dealt with challenges due to his race.

While on the team, he was not allowed to play in a game against Maryland due to a law forbidding Black players from dressing in games between Northern and Southern teams.

“He was not allowed to play when Syracuse went south of the Mason Dixon Line to play the University of Maryland. Black players were not allowed to play due to the ‘gentleman’s agreement,’” Pitoniak said.

The oppression Sidat-Singh encountered didn't stop on the field. He was often denied media coverage along with being forced to sit out certain games. Though this didn't stop Sidat-Singh.

Sidat-Singh first took the field for the Orange in 1937, signifying a pivotal moment in sports. Sidat-Singh was ahead of his time. In the NFL, over 40% of the quarterbacks who started in Week 1 of the 2023 season were Black.

"The Patrick Mahomes' and the Jalen Hurts' of the world probably have never heard of Wilmeth Sidat-Singh and yet they're standing on his shoulder pads so to speak," Pitoniak said.

The idea for "Invisible No More," according to the authors, originated over eight years ago. Pitoniak had written several SU-related books such as "Forever Orange" and "Color Him Orange," a story about former Syracuse men's basketball head coach Jim Boeheim.

Burton had written about World War II in the past, which was significant as Sidat-Singh died in a plane crash while training as a Tuskegee Airmen in 1943.

"It made sense for me but we also work hand in glove with each other on everything because we'll show something to the other and say, 'Hey, what do you think about this and, how do we make this stronger?' So it's a really strong partnership," Burton said.

Because of Sidat-Singh's death at a young age and the little media attention he received, there was little recollection of him. Pitoniak and Burton wanted to bring Sidat-Singh back to life through their historical fiction book.

"Invisible No More" follows aspiring Black journalist Brenna Sheldon, who stumbles upon Sidat-Singh and sees a potentially career-altering story.

"We felt in order to make this a modern story we needed to create a literary vehicle who stumbled upon this story... We wanted someone whom this story would really resonate with on a personal level," Pitoniak said.

Sidat-Singh's career and journey ended about 80 years ago, but his and Shelton's stories are easily translated into today's times. With their book, Pitoniak and Burton are making sure Sidat-Singh's story will live on.

"Rick, and I believe that this is very much a, although it takes place 100 years earlier, it is very much a 21st century story, in that we live in a world sadly in which there are many people who are fearful of being who they really are," Pitoniak said.