

Teen runner with disability races to the finish line

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Darrell Cross (left) and his wife, Melanie (right), have been by their daughter Michelle's side through her soccer and track endeavors. Cindy Yamanaka/Orange County Register/TNS

MISSION VIEJO, Calif. — Darrell Cross had spent plenty of time trying to teach his nearly 10-year-old daughter, Michelle, how to ride a bike. She still was having trouble learning, though, even with training wheels.

A bicycle shop employee told him to take off the pedals and let her push herself on the bike using her feet. Turns out, he was on to something.

With the pedals removed, Michelle guided the bicycle through the neighborhood for an entire weekend. Soon after, with pedals reattached, she was riding like a pro.

"It introduced us to this whole new world of being able to go out and ride a bike together as a family," Darrell Cross said.

Such family moments are usually ordinary, but this one was very special.

Physical Challenges Don't Hold Her Back

Michelle, now 16, was born with cerebral palsy. The condition has left her with limited balance and movement on her entire right side, and she can barely use her right arm at all. Simple things, like tying shoes and putting her hair up, are extremely challenging.

However, none of that has stopped her from becoming an excellent athlete.

Michelle, a junior at Trabuco Hills High, is a three-year member of the school's cross country and track teams. She has three bronze medals from last spring's state championships to her credit. Before taking up distance and track running, she was a standout in youth soccer.

"She played goalie, but she would bat that ball away with her left hand," said Melanie Cross, Michelle's mother. "Some of the high school coaches knew her because they'd seen her play."

Older Sister Is Always On Her Team

Michelle has a competitive spirit and a fun-loving personality. Both are the result of an incredibly supportive neighborhood in Rancho Santa Margarita.

Michelle grew up wearing braces and, for a time, an eye patch. She had to work hard to keep up with the neighborhood kids. Falls were common, but she received plenty of encouraging words and much support.

No one was more supportive than older sister Emily. When the two were growing up, Emily Cross helped Michelle into the family car, tied her shoes and patiently taught her everyday tasks, including how to get dressed on her own. "She's helped me a lot," Michelle said. "She's been influencing me with everything, she's always been assisting, and I've always looked up to her. When I was little, I would always follow her."

Emily Cross, 18, also played soccer as a youth but turned to running when she did not make the girls soccer team.

When Michelle reached her first year in high school, she followed her sister's lead. Her disability did not make things easy. Because of her limited balance, she has had more than her fair share of spills on the track. Her limited right side mobility forces her right foot to pound into the ground with each step.

Michelle works hard and never gives up, said Dennis Kelly, Trabuco Hills' girls track and field coach. "She's dedicated to what she does ... she never complains about the workouts or the weather."

Michelle gets back up and pushes on, her mother said. At a meet at Mission Viejo High, one fall led to an enormous opportunity. It was there that the family learned that the state meet would include races for athletes with physical disabilities.

A Fierce Competitor

In June 2016, the family was in Clovis, California, where Michelle competed in the state meet in the 100-, 200- and 400-meter races. She won bronze at all three events.

"I got goosebumps," Darrell Cross said. "We're planning on state again this year."

Emily Cross, now at San Francisco State University, said she got updates on her sister's progress.

"It's outstanding, beyond my words — I don't know how she does it," she said. "Running is hard enough as it is, and sometimes her foot hurts when she runs, or she can't feel it because of the constant pounding on the ground, but she still does it."

Trabuco Hills cross country coach Liam Clemons said Michelle has never used her disability as an excuse. "I feel like I can endure and handle more things than other people can because I have to work harder for it," Michelle said. "I know I have a lot of hard work to do, so I'm just going to hang in there."