

Women's History Month 2024

Janet Smith

In a sport that's been full of tremendous athletes and accomplishments, there's been no greater girls cross country runner from New Jersey than Janet Smith. In fact, her dominance was astounding.

As someone who achieved their success in the years after the passage of Title IX in 1972 granted unprecedented opportunities for female athletes, you might think she benefited from the positive effects of the legislation.

While that was certainly true, it still wasn't easy for Smith as a young, developing athlete. In fact, her grammar school coach had her run with the boys team, but wearing a wool cap to hide the fact that she was a girl. At the championship meet, he entered his runners by first initial rather than their full name, lest anyone make a fuss.

Smith, who graduated from J.P. Stevens High School in Edison in 1984, would later be named Athlete of the Century in Girls' Cross Country by The Star-Ledger. Her success didn't come easy - during those years she dealt with things like exercise-induced asthma, a hamstring issue and a six-inch growth spurt between her sophomore and junior seasons.

During her career (the 1980 through '83 seasons), she was a four-time Central Jersey, Group 4 champion. She was the first of three runners who've accomplished that feat in that section.

At the Group 4 state meet, she was also a four-time champion. She was the first of three runners to be a four-time Group winner.

At the Meet of Champions, she was the winner as a freshman, sophomore and senior, and the runner-up as a junior. She is one of four athletes to win the MOC three times.



At the conclusion of her senior year, she ran the third-fastest race ever at Van Cordlandt Park in New York in winning the Kinney Northeast Regional race. That showing earned her a spot at the Kinney National Championship in San Diego, and she became the first and only New Jersey girl to win the national title.

During her senior year, she also set a course-record time of 17:36 at Holmdel Park which held for 27 years.

After high school, she ran at North Carolina State, and was a 10-time All-America in cross country and track. She was a Top 10 finisher three times at the NCAA cross country championship.

She had one more outstanding moment in 1987, when she finished 23rd at the World Cross Country Championships, a showing that enabled the United States to gain a narrow victory over the Soviet Union for the team title.

