

# Track runs in the family for Morken girls

By Sarah Brown

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Grace and Helen Morken are no strangers to state running awards and championships, and they hold seven Carrboro High School track records between them.

The petite, blond sisters might only be teenagers, but both are seasoned running competitors. It didn't take the girls long to be bitten by the running bug.

"We started running with the Durham Striders when we were 8 or 9. It's been a while," Grace said, laughing.

## A family affair

High school senior Grace, 18, and sophomore Helen, 16, live in Chapel Hill and are two of six children. David Morken, their father, is an ultra-marathon runner and a triathlete who's completed several Ironman triathlons, and mother Chrishelle was a sprinter in college.

Five of the siblings have already followed in their parents' footsteps, running on recreational and middle and high school teams.

"Running is definitely a family thing," Helen said. "They come and cheer us on at all the meets."

The infinite challenges of running are what keep both Morken girls coming back to the track every day.

A typical training schedule during the track season includes distance runs three or four days a week and two workout sessions with short, fast intervals.

"It's so hard, but it's an opportunity to push yourself," Grace said.

Helen said she loves the rush she feels following a good run.

"It makes me so much happier if I exercise after school and then go and do homework afterwards," she said.

School running teams are familiar turf for the Morkens — and daily hourlong runs provide ample time to build friendships, Helen said. She said they've been training with many of the same girls for years.

"We all have a really close bond," Grace agreed. "They're not just our teammates."

## Carrboro's winning ways

That bond has helped carry the Carrboro girls' team to 2A N.C. High



**Carrboro High School running stars Grace (left) and Helen Morken look to dominate the track and field scene for yet another season. (Staff photo by Sarah Brown)**

School Athletic Association championships in cross-country for four consecutive seasons and in track and field for the past two — despite the fact that Carrboro High School only opened in 2006.

"Overall, we've started off with great athletic programs," said Melvin Griffin, head coach of Carrboro track and field for all six years.

Grace has won seven individual state running crowns herself, including three in cross-country — quite a feat since she considers herself more of a sprinter, focusing on the 800-meter and 1,600-meter track races.

"Both (cross-country and track) have their benefits, but short distance and fast is much easier for me," she said.

Griffin said the goal for the Jaguars girls' team going into the new track season is, on the outset, winning a third straight state title.

The coaching staff will also work with each athlete on developing personal goals in the next couple of weeks, he said.

"We talk to the kids one on one," he said. "We want kids to run what they want, but we try to lead them into events where they can earn a spot in the regional meet."

Griffin emphasized that strategizing and planning for each race are as

important as talent for track athletes.

Stars like Grace and Helen are sometimes called on to run tactical races rather than for time, so the squad as a whole can rack up more points at meets, Griffin said.

"They're willing to do whatever it takes to help the team," he said.

## Supportive sisters

No one can deny that the Morken sisters are at the upper echelon of North Carolina's high school runners.

Although they sometimes compete in the same events, the girls are highly supportive of each other in their athletic endeavors, said Mimi O'Grady, Carrboro's assistant middle-distance track coach.

O'Grady, a lifelong runner herself who's been coaching the Morkens for two years, said she'd be hard-pressed to find two more genuine, kind people than Grace and Helen.

"They completely set the tone for the team," she said. "They're not only gifted athletes, they're also wonderful team players."

Beloved and hard to replace the Morken girls may be — but one half of the pair won't be a Jaguar for much longer. Grace will be graduating this June and joining the freshman class at UNC-Chapel Hill in the fall.

Grace's running resume caught the eye of UNC's running coaches, and she signed to be a walk-on for the women's cross-country and track teams in March.

"I'm really excited," she said. "It'll definitely be a new, more demanding thing, but it's a great opportunity."

Helen already has three top-six state finishes in less than two years — and she's hoping to snag her first individual state title in the 3,200-meter run this year.

Last Thursday, the Carrboro girls kicked off their conference season in Hillsborough with a dominating team win at Cedar Ridge High School's home meet.

Grace won both the 800-meter and 1,600-meter contests, and Helen ran off by herself in the 3,200, — more than 90 seconds faster than her nearest opponent.

Those talented girls could have big futures in the running discipline, wherever their fleet feet might take them.