



During the inaugural Blue Shoes event in 2007, Alan Webb electrified spectators by becoming the first miler to break the four minute barrier on a South Carolina track.

STORY BY GARY HYNDMAN | PHOTOS BY OLIVIER BLANCHARD

Chris Borch's vision for Greenville is both ambitious and precise: establish it as a "track town of the East."

The lofty aspiration infers a reference to the undisputed and perennial track town of the West – Eugene, Oregon. Home to the storied University of Oregon track and field program, Eugene's collective passion for the sport birthed sportswear icon Nike, nurtured such Olympians as Steve Prefontaine and Frank Shorter and stoked a 1970s-era national running craze.

Borch and others contend Greenville is positioned to duplicate Eugene's affection for long distance running—if perhaps on a smaller scale. The optimism is based on synergy, everything from an infusion of cash to attract top collegiate runners to a long distance training program with an international reputation to an emerging cultural trend.

Running as both sport and recreation is enjoying a nationwide revival says Bill Pierce, chair of Furman University's Health and Exercise Science Department. He notes that 425,000 runners finish marathons nationally each year. Organizers at major events have resorted to a lottery system to satisfy the demand from inspired amateurs.

"The fact they pay to (run in marathons) tells us how serious they are," says Pierce.

Locally, the Greenville Track Club has seen its ranks swell to a record 860 members. Its annual Reedy River Run attracts five times the number of participants it once did.

The club has also partnered with Furman to host Blue Shoes Weekends twice each year. These celebrations of running have brought such

track legends as Tommie Smith and Frank Shorter to Greenville. Bill Rodgers, who dominated the Boston and New York marathons from 1975 to 1980, will be the keynote speaker at the Blue Shoes Dinner this month.

The weekend will again feature the running of the Blue Shoes Mile, an event that has drawn elite distance runners to Furman.

Two years ago Alan Webb made history and electrified 3,000 spectators by becoming the first miler to break the four minute barrier on a South Carolina track.

Like all synergy, local promotion of the sport has benefited from some unanticipated, even uncanny, gifts.

For example, there was the recent announcement that Zap Fitness's team of Olympic hopefuls will train at Furman next winter. (See story, pg. 24) "It's another step toward



FIRST's Bill Pierce says running as both sport and recreation is enjoying a nationwide revival. He notes that 425,000 runners finish marathons each year. Locally, the Greenville Track Club has seen its ranks rise to record numbers.

putting Greenville on the map as a premier running destination," says Greenville Track Club President Joe Hammond.

Then there is the Swamp Rabbit Trail. The public corridor currently under development will eventually provide runners with 17 to 20 miles of graded surface largely insulated from street traffic. "We're going to see (running) get even much bigger once the Swamp Rabbit Trail is up and running," Pierce predicts.

BLUE SHOES

Putting his personal stamp on the local movement is Borch, who, ironically, lives 3,000 miles away. The California resident does, however, maintain close ties to the local community through his alma mater.

Four years ago Borch, who ran cross country and track at Furman, and his wife, Andrea, established

and endowed the Blue Shoes program at Furman to fund scholarships for men's and women's cross country and track and field.

Ken Pettus, Furman's director of athletic development, says the school once fielded one of the top running programs in the South. But "severe" budget cuts over the years left the program underfunded and eroded its athletic scholarships, a double whammy at

STORY CONTINUED ON PG. 25

From Walk-On To Front Runner

Borch's story runs deeper than just scholarship funding

In August 1974, a wiry freshman named Chris Borch finished dead last in a four-mile cross country time trial around Furman's placid lake. No one realized that this inauspicious debut would be the start of a beautiful relationship.

Thirty-five years later the Furman graduate – and former walk-on – is the ringleader of an effort to restore the school's lost prominence in his preferred sports. In 2005, Borch and his wife, Andrea, established and endowed Blue Shoes, a fundraising campaign to create new track and cross country scholarships and improve its track facilities.

For Borch, the name Blue Shoes holds special significance. Despite his unimpressive time trial performance, he wasn't forgotten when former Furman cross country coach Bill Keesling handed out the coveted blue Onitsuka running shoes at the start of that 1974 season. It was a show of faith the young runner wouldn't soon forget.

Borch, a non-scholarship athlete, began that season at the bottom of the 12-man team. "Furman had a great program in those days," he recalls.

Borch worked during the team's 80-mile training weeks and he steadily improved. He rose to the number two position on the team and went on to claim a Southern Conference championship in the 10,000 meters.

Perhaps his proudest accomplishment, though, was his school freshman record of 13:51 in the three-mile run, exactly one minute slower than the best time of his idol – Steve Prefontaine.



Borch, shown here accepting Furman's Alumni Service Award, believes that receiving a track scholarship was one of his "first big breaks in life."

Perhaps most importantly, Borch earned an athletic scholarship that helped him complete his education.

In addition to earning a degree, "life lessons" were absorbed on training runs that Borch later applied to his business practices. They included: identify your goals, work hard and never give up.

Today, Micro-Mechanics, the electronics technology company he founded 26 years ago, employs 550 people in the U.S. and Asia, and is publicly traded.

Borch's professional success has enabled him to invest in his alma mater's cross country and track programs. And his personal experience with scholarship assistance reinforces its importance. "Later on I realized that was one of my first big breaks in life," he says.

Furman officials call Borch a visionary who believes Blue Shoes can be a catalyst for turning Greenville into a mecca for runners not unlike Eugene, Oregon.

"In all honesty," says Ken Pettus, Furman's director of athletic development, "he is not only the provider of the funds, he's the engine that drives (Blue Shoes)." – Written by Gary Hyndman



Greenville To Get Zapped

Olympic running hopefuls to train at Furman next winter

Pete Rea spent a day touring the Greenville area with Furman athletic director Gary Clark and came away impressed. "I had no idea how many great places there were to run until I visited there," he says.

After some wooing by Furman officials and weeks of speculation, coach Rea recently announced he would bring his Zap Fitness runners to train at the school for six weeks next winter.

The Blowing Rock, NC-based center is one of four facilities around the country training elite U.S. runners to compete at an international level. All but one athlete on its 2008 roster qualified for the Olympic Trials.

Since 2001, the Zap team has been traveling 11 hours to Tallahassee, FL for winter training.

Besides the closer geographic proximity "just down the hill" from Blowing Rock, Rea likes the available unpaved surfaces for

STORY BY GARY HYNDMAN

running, the school's aquatic center for cross training, and access to the new Swamp Rabbit Trail that is under development adjacent to campus.

Actually, Rea's exposure to Furman pre-dates his visit with Clark. Some of his runners competed previously in the Blue Shoes Mile held each spring at the school's track.

It was at that event two years ago that Rea first met Chris Borch. A Furman graduate, Borch is the chief benefactor and visionary behind the Blue Shoes campaign that is currently raising funds for athletic scholarships and to improve the school's track facilities.

Rea sought out Borch to thank him for his efforts on behalf of a sport that routinely gets ignored when competing with its higher-profile counterparts. Borch then became the conduit for Furman extending an invitation to Zap Fitness.

The Zap team of runners and coaches are expected to live and train at Furman from mid-February through most of March 2010.

Rea says he and his runners are accustomed to being active in the community where they settle. "I hope we'll be able to run with members of the track club," he says.

That's fine with Greenville Track Club President Joe Hammond, who promises his organization will receive them with open arms. In addition to inviting Zap runners to put on clinics and demonstrations and run in club races, Hammond hopes to host them for social events in members' homes.

He expects the unusual opportunity will galvanize and motivate local runners. "I'm hoping it will improve the level of performance for some of our runners," he says.

The commitment is only for 2010, though Rea acknowledges it will likely become an annual visit. "I anticipate this will be a long-term thing," he says.

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CONTINUED FROM PG. 23

a private school with high tuition costs. Realizing it could no longer compete without a renewed financial commitment, Pettus says Borch was approached to help. Through 2008, Blue Shoes raised \$2.8 million. For each \$1 million contributed to the endowment, Furman adds a half-scholarship toward a goal of creating 15 full scholarships in five years.

Blue Shoes is also raising funds to build a track house, bleachers and press box at Furman's track.

Some experts predict the investment will transform the school into a national power in long distance running over the next decade.

The project appears to already be paying dividends. Patrick Morgan, a Blue Shoes scholarship recipient, recently set a school record in the mile, just missing the qualifying time for the NCAA Championships. Lee Gilmer, who also receives Blue Shoes support, placed second in the 800 meters at the Southern Conference Indoor Championships as a freshman, earning all conference honors.

The Mobile, Alabama native acknowledges Furman's academic reputation and the scholarship assistance were incentives. (The money) was a big motivating factor in me choosing Furman," says Gilmer.

THE FIRST PROGRAM

Last month, the Furman Institute of Running and Scientific Training hosted a four-day retreat for 16 runners. "As soon as we put these (registrations) up on the web site, they're gone," says Pierce.

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FIRST, as it's known, was Pierce's idea. A runner himself, he approached Furman's administration about establishing a testing and training center to promote the sport. With the school's backing, he also recruited faculty in his department to staff it.

The FIRST model, which applies principles of exercise physiology to improve a runner's efficiency and performance, got a boost when Runner's World magazine endorsed its "individually tailored training program" in a series of stories. That was followed in 2007 by the release of "Run Less Run Faster," a book authored by Pierce and other FIRST staff that has remained one of Amazon's best sellers.

The response over the six years of the institute's existence has been global. On this particular day, Pierce has answered emails from runners from as far away as Canada, Italy and Spain.

"I hear from runners around the world every day," says Pierce.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Borch, who has spoken with Oregon track coach Vin Lananna about Eugene's success, says building partnerships between the university and the community are essential to growing the sport of running.

Blue Shoes appears to provide that bridge between the two. Offer runners quality events and facilities, spark their interest with visits by legendary athletes and sprinkle in a visionary's energy, and you've got the makings of a phenomenon.

"(Borch's) seen what's happened at Oregon," says Pettus, "and he truly believes we could be the Oregon of the East."

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