

By Nicholas Baltz

Sports Editor

C a l i f o r n i a ' s three greatest community college distance runners are all named Aminat Olowara.

Even the state's most elite athletes were no match for SWC's gifted distance star, as Olowara turned in the nation's best times in the 1,500 meters, 5K and 10K . She ran away with three gold medals and three state titles.

Even her coach, Olympic silver medalist Tonuie Campbell, was in awe. Campbell said Olowara was the best athlete at the meet, male or female.

Olowara began her championship run in the 10K, her longest and strongest event, as she lapped the entire field to win in 35:31.92.

Fresh off a night's rest, Olowara battled talented College of the Sequoias star Yesenia Silva in the 1,500. Olowara paced herself off of Silva throughout to win in 4:33.09.

"We ran at the cross country state championships together," Olowara said. "She is one of the best athletes. I saved my kick for her at the end because if I didn't save the kick and I start out running fast, she might beat me."

No one threatened Olowara in the 5K and she wrapped up her fabulous freshman season with her third gold, crushing the field in 17:13.87.

While Olowara carted away three uncontested gold medals, another Lady Jaguar voluntarily shared a state championship with a respected competitor.

Freshmen Jayla Spencer and Destinee Thayer were the only other members of the SWC team competing for a state title, both running in the 400-meter hurdles.

Spencer exploded out of the start, taking an early lead, with Thayer in tow. At the halfway point De Anza College's Katie Baxter to moved up next to Spencer.

Baxter and Spencer took their last three hurdles simultaneously, gutting their way towards gold in the final stretch. Campbell rose to his feet for the finish and rejoiced as Spencer edged Baxter, improving her personal record by two full seconds (1:01.87).

Baxter immediately shouted to her coach, pointing back at the course, visibly upset, while Spencer soaked in her moment of victory.

"I feel like I'm on top of the world right now," said Spencer. "I can't believe it. It's been such a journey like I told you, and this my rebirth, so to come and do this it means the world to me."

As it turned out though, the championship was not yet settled. Baxter contested the race and officials found that her second hurdle was three inches too high. Baxter, though frustrated, was gracious.

"I'm one of those people who likes to count their steps in between (hurdles)," she said. "Honestly, I tried as hard as could and couldn't catch her, but there's nothing I can do about it. She's an amazing competitor."

As meet officials discussed possibly re-running the race the next day in Santa Barbara, Spencer offered to call it a co-championship. De Anza College head coach Nick Matus said he was proud of how the women responded.

"Sometimes as coaches we learn a lot from the girls, like sportsmanship and camaraderie among the athletes," he said. "I'm very proud of both of them."

Spencer and Baxter met once more on the podium to receive twin gold medals, Spencer threw her fist in the air as she always does, drawing comparisons to Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics as well as Olympic medalist Campbell standing on the sidelines.

"It was in fact the best State Championships that Southwestern College has ever had," he said beaming. "Olowara, what more can you say? Obviously she's the best athlete, bar none, male or female, in the state. Then to have my girl Jayla win the 400, because we all know she won the 400, it was icing on the cake."