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### Aurora Central: 'A Trojan for life...'

*The Godfather of Aurora prep athletics, the city's original high school -- Aurora Central -- has been a winner for a long time*

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Aurora's rich prep athletic tradition began at its original high school, which has stood the test of time despite drastic changes going on around it.

From the christening of the city of Aurora in 1907, Aurora Central — originally Aurora High School, among several other incarnations— stood alone athletically and academically in the rapidly growing area until instant rival Hinkley opened in 1963.

Through wars, social change and a population explosion, the athletic feats of the Trojans were a source of pride in the community and laid the foundation for Aurora's current city-wide status as a force in every prep sport in Colorado.

Boys gymnastics and girls track and field had dynastic eras at the school, which has collected 19 state championships in seven different sports during its time of big school competition.

Even the Aurora Central teams that didn't win state titles were filled with legendary athletes and coaches who carved out their own bit of lore and left a lingering example for Trojans to this day.

Though it moved from location to location for many years until settling in its current building in 1955, Aurora Central High School — originally Aurora High School — has been know for its dedication to athletics.

The long-reaching roots of a tradition-rich athletic program that has won 19 state championships in seven sports all-time started to take hold in the 1920s, when the basketball team played on a dirt floor and had to avoid steam pipes to shoot baskets.

Bouncing around from conference to conference as Colorado grew — the Northern Conference, the Central Suburban, Centennial, Continental and Skyline leagues, with the new East Metro Athletic Conference on the horizon for 2010-2011 — Aurora Central has never lost its competitiveness, though major demographic changes and the advent of open enrollment have had an effect.

The school has had consecutive dynastic eras: the two decades of boys gymnastics between 1960 and 1980 that produced eight state titles — and the track-dominated decade of the 1980s, when the Aurora Central girls won five times and the boys once. They are by far the two best stretches for any public school program in Aurora prep history and are only rivaled by the 16 boys swimming state championships won in 17 years by Regis Jesuit.

### Beginnings

Though it took until 1986 for the first boys track championship to come to Aurora Central, the roots of greatness were in place right away with the arrival of coaching legend Bob Caviness in 1955.

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Longtime Aurora Central High School coach Larry Taylor holds up the Class 4A state championship trophy won by the school's boys basketball team in 1983. Taylor was an assistant on that team — which defeated Montbello 68-58 at McNichols Arena — under coach Byron Brookhart. Taylor has coached at the school in a variety of capacities, including time as head boys and girls basketball coach and head boys and girls golf coach. The 1961 graduate ran track and played football and basketball at Aurora Central. (Photo by Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel)

Caviness moved over to the new Williams C. Hinkley High School when it opened in 1963, but his eight years at Aurora Central were impactful locally and in Colorado. He was the driving force behind the Aurora Relays — a track meet that grew in size and prestige for several years after its advent in 1957. It continues 54 years later as the Robert F. Caviness Invitational, the longest-running meet in the state.

The meet, which was run at Ilium Field outside the school during the early years, went off despite the weather, which created some interesting situations.

Larry Taylor, a multi-sport athlete and 1961 graduate of Aurora Central who continues to coach at his alma mater, was a high jumper for Caviness and remembers one Aurora Relay meet vividly.

"It was a horrible day outside, but Bob was determined to run the meet," Taylor recalled. "We had to pull out mats and high jump in the gym. It was that type of meet."

In 1962, the Trojans won the meet for the first and only time on the boys side.

Early running stars for Caviness included Don Sanchez and Bob Griffith, who won individual state cross country championships back-to-back in 1958 and 1959. Three other Aurora Central cross country runners — Mark Kotich (1965), Randy Stoneman (1975) and Ray Louis (1976) — followed in their footsteps as state champions.

Thrower Jim McArdle tossed the shot put and the discus for Aurora Central in the late 1950s, and his legacy remains. More than 50 years later, McArdle — who went on to a career at the University of Arizona — still holds the school records of 57 feet, 8 inches in the shot put and 177-6 in the discus.

The boys cross country team finished second in both 1958 and 1959, but the first state championships came in 1960 courtesy of coach Don Robinson's boys gymnastics team and the boys tennis team boosted by No. 2 singles state champion Gene Licka.

While the tennis team couldn't get back on top again, Robinson's boys gymnastics team made it a habit. Known as the "father of Aurora gymnastics," Robinson led the team to state championships again in 1961, 1963 and 1964.

Robinson left for Arizona State University, and his successor, Ron Jackson, also won four titles: in 1967, 1972 (an undefeated team featuring L.J. Larson, who went on to an All-American career at Arizona State under Robinson), 1978 and 1980 before boys gymnastics disappeared due to lack of numbers.

Baseball also started fast at Aurora Central under coach Herb Buchkowski, who oversaw the program for a quarter century, including state championship runs in 1963 and 1969.

Playing center field on the 1963 state championship team — which beat Wasson 8-4 at Jackson Field in Greeley for the title — was Don Young, who soon went on to sign a free agent contract with the Chicago Cubs. Young made it to the major leagues at the age of 19 and played three seasons with Chicago.

Also on that team was standout senior pitcher Tim Scheibeler, a three-sport star who would return to coach the Aurora Central baseball team as part of three decades of coaching and teaching in the Aurora Public Schools system.

Another baseball title came in 1969 with an 8-2 rout of Greeley Central at Jackson Field, which made Aurora Central the only city high school with more than one state baseball title. Though no more championships came, the program remained competitive for quite awhile behind a slew of major league-caliber talent.

Other baseball draftees from Aurora Central include Norbert Beddow (California Angels, 1967), Craig Bozich (Detroit Tigers, 1965), Ken Deal (St. Louis Cardinals, 1987), Ronald DeJean (Houston, 1970) and Thomas Kelley (Cleveland Indians, 1970).

Mark Corey went to Baltimore in the second round of the 1976 draft, playing in parts of three seasons with the Orioles.

Aurora Central's most accomplished professional player turned out to be Danny Jackson, a left-handed

pitcher who played 14 seasons in the major leagues with five different teams.

With the Trojans, the 1980 graduate — who also starred in football and basketball — was part of some quality teams that dueled it out with city rival Hinkley, which at the time featured another future major leaguer in right-handed pitcher Brian Fisher.

Jackson briefly went to the University of Oklahoma, but got drafted in 1982 by the Kansas City Royals. He started two games for Kansas City in the 1985 World Series, in which the Royals beat the St. Louis Cardinals to win the world championship.

In 1988 with Cincinnati, Jackson went 23-8 with a 2.73 ERA and ended up as a National League All-Star and finished second in Cy Young award voting. Two seasons later, he won another World Series with the Reds. Jackson also pitched for the Philadelphia Phillies, Chicago Cubs and St. Louis Cardinals.

Helped by players who grew up playing heated pickup games at nearby Del Mar Park, the basketball program remained one of the school's strengths. A long line of greats in the 1970s included one season with Tom Chambers, a future NBA All-Star who finished his prep career at Fairview High School.

Jackson's older brother, Mike, nearly led Aurora Central to the state hoops championship in 1978-79, but the Trojans finished an agonizing fourth place after a tough loss to Regis Jesuit in the state semifinals.

Led by Mike Jackson, a high-flying point guard, Eric Shells and Bobby Ladouceur, the Trojans rolled past Thompson Valley and Denver East to set up a clash with Regis Jesuit, which featured star forward Dave Coffman.

Aurora Central had its chance to take control of the game in the closing seconds, but a key turnover set up Regis Jesuit for the win. Jackson rose in the lane for a shot that he normally took, but instead passed to a wide-open teammate underneath the basket. The ball was fumbled and went out of bounds, allowing the Raiders to get the final possession, which they scored on to come away with a 45-43 win.

"It still makes me sick when I think about it; Mike made a great play, but we wish he would have taken the shot," Lee Rosa, Aurora Central's athletic director at the time and a big backer of the school's basketball program, said of the sequence.

Jackson finished his career as the first player in Aurora Central history to score 1,000 points — a milestone matched by 2007 graduate Stephen Franklin — then went on to a standout career at the University of Wyoming. He was an All-American as a senior and was a first-round NBA draft choice of the then-Kansas City Kings in 1983, but a severe knee injury ended his playing career.

Rosa would witness some winning in the 1982-83 athletic year that would help the disappointment fade, as the wrestling and boys basketball teams won state championships in the same year, which at the time made it the only school to accomplish the feat.

There had been individual state wrestling champions in Aurora Central's past in the Butch Dougherty (112 pounds, 1960), Doug (127 pounds, 1961) and Paul MacArthur (112 pounds, 1967), Dennis Jouette (138 pounds, 1968) and the dominating Sondgeroth brothers, Jim (the 138-pound 3A champion in 1976) and Lewis (the 3A 119-pound champion in 1977 who had an astonishing 89-1 career record), but coach Doug Kinney had the first team winner.

The Trojans became the first Centennial League team to win a state championship — and still the only Aurora team ever to do it — accomplishing it the unconventional way without an individual state champion.

The Trojans had to sweat it out until the last match of the night at the Denver Coliseum, as Fruita Monument's Dean Hall could have stolen the title with a win in the heavyweight championship game. Hall had the advantage late in his match against Skyline's Shawn Johnson. Johnson rallied from a 6-4 deficit to win 11-7, a result that gave Aurora Central the crown.

Senior 112-pounder Chris Carter was the Trojans' lone finalist and was seconds from victory before Cheyenne Mountain's Frank Crast scored a takedown in the last second for a 4-3 victory. It was the only loss of the season for Carter, who finished 20-1.

Key points also came from the third of Kelly Sondgeroth at 126 points, the fourth of Kent Schock at 167

pounds, the fifth of Neil Blake at 138 pounds and the sixth of heavyweight Carlos Taylor.

The championship euphoria had just barely settled down when coach Byron Brookhart and the Aurora Central boys basketball team got it back with their run to a matching state title.

Led by 6-9 senior center Charlie Simpson and guards Billy Ladouceur and Gary Taylor, the Trojans shared the Centennial League regular season championship with Smoky Hill and had to beat the Buffaloes in an epic overtime contest in the district finals.

Taking a 10-game winning streak into the postseason, Aurora Central ripped off wins against Thomas Jefferson (a tense one-point victory), Mitchell and Cherry Creek to reach the championship game against Montbello at McNichols Arena.

At the time, the only other Aurora Central basketball team to reach the finals was believed to be the Aurora High team during World War II that lost to Castle Rock in Class B play.

The Trojans weren't to be denied, finishing off Montbello 68-58 behind 20 points from Gary Taylor, 14 each from Simpson and David Powell and 10 from Ladouceur. The victory capped a 21-4 season and added some shine to the coaching career of Brookhart, who was 153-86 in 11 seasons before leaving in 1988 due to health reasons when Larry Taylor took over.

The consecutive championships were a perfect way to end a career for Rosa, who retired at the conclusion of the school year after 11 years as athletic director, a time in which Aurora Central won eight state titles. Besides the championships, Rosa enjoyed the fierce competition the Trojans had with Hinkley, its only rival until 1973 when Gateway opened.

A quarter of a century later, Rosa remains a big supporter of Aurora Central athletics, the basketball team in particular. The boys have continued to give him some thrills over the past decade, making it to the Class 5A Final Four twice and playing for the state title in 2006-07, when they lost to Denver East in the state final. That defeat was the only suffered by the Trojans that season under former coach Bob Caton, who led the team to a dominating 78-3 record and three Skyline League titles over a three-year span.

Current coach Ian Calvert guided Aurora Central back to the 5A semifinals in 2009-10 in his third season on the bench.

Aurora Central's success in girls basketball has been sporadic in the recent past, but in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Trojans were the team to beat in Aurora.

The best team in school history was likely the 1978-79 outfit coached by Stan Raabe, a group led by Cathey Steadman which finished 20-5. The Trojans took third in the state that year before Steadman, who scored 65 points in tournament games, graduated.

The next group included center Yvonne McKinnon, who led the Trojans to a 59-14 record in her three seasons as a starter. The New Mexico-signee couldn't get the team to a state championship, however, as Aurora Central finished fourth in 1980 — after losing to Thornton in the state semifinals — and fifth in 4A in 1981.

The 2009-10 Aurora Central girls team won the Skyline League championship under coach Eric Dow and earned a home game in the first round of the 5A playoffs.

The juggernaut of female sports at Aurora Central, however, was clearly the girls track team of the 1980s, which won back-to-back state championships in 1981 and 1982 and captured an unprecedented three-peat in 1987, 1988 and 1989.

The track team is the only girls program at Aurora Central with a state title to its credit. The beginnings of the team's run to power began in 1981.

Under coach Judy Gerard, the Trojans edged Wheat Ridge 47-42 to win the Class 3A state championship at Dutch Clark Stadium in Pueblo behind a group that included Rhonda Blanford (now Blanford-Green), Jai Rogers, Diana Gould and basketball star Yvonne McKinnon. The win was not only the first for an Aurora Central girls team, it was also the first in any sport for any Aurora girls team.

Blanford-Green piled up 34 points as a senior, winning the 100-meter low hurdles and taking second in the long jump and 100 and 200 meter dashes. She had run relays all season, but the coaching staff had her only compete individually at state.

The Trojans — who lost the Centennial League championship a week earlier on the last event — needed a third-place or better finish in the meet-concluding 800-medley relay. Rogers, the anchor leg, got them across the finish line in second to wrap up the title.

"They won the next year, but they had a really good group of seniors in 1982; in 1981, it was pieces of a puzzle fitting together," said Blanford-Green, who came to Aurora as a sophomore from Fairbanks, Alaska, with her father, who was in the military.

"That was a total team effort; everybody knew they had a job to do, from the coaches all the way down to the water person," she said. "Everybody supported everybody, and nobody was selfish. We had a culture at the time that just bred success."

Blanford-Green — who still holds four Aurora Central school records — went on to a track career at the University of Nebraska that brought her two national hurdling titles and All-American honors 12 times, in addition to two NCAA team titles. A qualifier for the Olympic Trials in both 1984 and 1988, Blanford-Green was inducted into the Colorado Sportswomen Hall of Fame in 1985. She now works for the Colorado High School Activities Association.

The Trojans coasted to victory the next season, taking the 1982 title at Jefferson County Stadium with a 50-33 victory over Pomona.

Rogers and Gould led the way as Aurora Central became the first Colorado girls track team to defend its state title outright. Gould was the meet MVP as she contributed a total of 38 points, winning the state title in 100, taking second in the 200 and running on record-setting 800-medley and 4x200-meter relay teams.

After a few years off the top of the podium, the Trojans were back in 1987, 1988 and 1989 under coach Steve Hesser — an Aurora Central track standout in the 1970s who was an assistant on the first two title teams.

The championship three-peat started in 1987 with a 57-54 win over George Washington in Pueblo, a result which capped an undefeated season for Aurora Central, the Centennial League champions in the last season before moving to the Continental League in 1988. The Trojans wrapped up the crown with a fourth-place finish by their 800-meter sprint medley team.

A common theme of the Trojans' three wins was the 800-meter dominance of Trina Edmond — the school's only all-state girls cross country runner — who won the event for the first time as a sophomore, marking Aurora Central's only individual championship in 1987.

Edmond had championship company in 1988, as Nicole Roberts (discus), Dayna Cavenar (triple jump) and the 4x100- and 4x400-meter relay teams claimed gold in a dominating 80-point performance. Jumper Regina Rhodes heavily contributed for the second straight season.

A third title came for Edmond — a future University of Colorado athlete — in 1989, when Aurora Central scored 61 points to become the first state girls team to win three consecutive titles. Edmond had a hand in 32 of those points, including work on the winning 4x400-meter relay team.

Fairview ended Aurora Central's reign in 1990, edging the Trojans by two points at Jefferson County Stadium. The teams were tied with two events left, but the Knights clipped Delanie Worley and Aurora Central at the conclusion.

The Trojans took second in 5A in 1991 before the depth of teams in the larger classification began to change their fortunes.

Blanford-Green was the school's luminary track figure on the girls side, but the boys didn't have one until Pat Manson came along a few years later. Coincidentally, both ended up competing in the same conference in college.

Manson — a pole vault legend still revered by followers of Colorado track and field — helped lead a record-

setting 1986 Aurora Central boys team to its first state championship.

It took until his senior season, but Manson — also a soccer star — wasn't surprised the boys track team finally got it done. He really felt the athletic momentum of the time period at Aurora Central, as he'd grown up in the area and knew the names of the top athletes who came before him.

"We had a championship basketball team just before me and that's the stuff of legends at the high school level; that's what contributes to a good generation," Manson said. "With what the teams and athletes before did, it made us believe that it was totally reasonable that we could win a state championship. It wasn't other schools doing it, we could do it. That was a big feeling."

Manson did yeoman's work for the championship team coached by John Green and T.J. Henderson, having a hand in 36 of the team's 68 points. Individually, he won the state championship in the pole vault as he cleared a state meet record of 17 feet, 3 inches (lower than the 18 feet he'd been passing regularly all season) and took second in the long jump — setting a still-standing school record of 23-8 1/2 on just two attempts. He also the opening leg of the championship-winning 4x100-meter relay team and anchored the second-place 4x400 relay squad.

Sprint star Omar Whitfield added 28 points, highlighted by the 100-meter dash championship, as the Trojans set six school records en route to a 16-point win over favored Montbello.

"It became apparent during the season that we would be in the running for the championship, and we all got really excited about it," Manson said. "There was a neat mix of guys with good chemistry and great coaches in John Green and T.J. Henderson. It was a lot of fun."

The year was topped off for Manson when he won the prestigious Fred Steinmark Award, then given out by the *Rocky Mountain News*, before heading off to the University of Kansas, where he was a multiple All-American and set some NCAA records. Manson — who still holds the all-classification and state meet records in the pole vault — was the country's top-ranked pole vaulter in 1996 and 1997 and just missed making the Olympic team in both 1996 and 2000.

The Aurora Central football program has seen many special talents don shoulder pads and helmets, but no squad has been able to bring home a state championship.

The 1963 team coached by Royal Shepherd got within range of it, losing in the state semifinals. That Aurora Central squad included four players who went on to start at the University of Colorado, among them quarterback Dan Kelly, halfback John Farler and linebacker Kerry Mottl.

The Aurora Central group combined to help the Buffaloes make the Bluebonnet Bowl in 1967. The Green Bay Packers selected Farler in the 14th round of the 1968 NFL Draft.

Other well-known football stars for the Trojans include Bozich — who won the school's only Gold Helmet Award from The Denver Post in 1964 and went on to play at Brigham Young — Bart Roth (who went on to CU) and Dave Gonzales (a Northern Colorado standout and current Rangeview football coach).

The school doesn't have its own boys swim team anymore, co-opting with the other three district schools on a team based at Hinkley, but Michael Ebuna is the only state swim champion in Aurora Central history.

Ebuna won the 200-yard individual medley and 500-yard freestyle in 1988 before going on to a career at the University of Tennessee.

In girls swimming, coach Don Doyle built a strong program between 1981 and 2002, one that ruled the Aurora Public Schools Championship meet for five years straight in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In girls tennis, the Trojans were a force in the 1970s, when three singles players and one doubles team managed to make state championship matches. Amy Wampler (1970), Louise Holocher (1973) and Barbara Eaton (1975) all lost in the No. 1 singles state final, while Sue Humm and Amy Hulse fell in the No. 2 doubles title match in 1977, when Aurora Central finished an all-time best fourth in the state team standings.

Eaton went on to make a name for herself as a national champion at the University of Northern Colorado, winning an AIAW singles title and achieving All-American status in 1981.

Only one classification of boys golf existed in 1964, so the clear champion of Colorado existed in Aurora Central's Dan Dymerski, who won the competition at the Pueblo City Golf Course. Dymerski played at the University of Colorado.

The school's most accomplished golfer is Ken Krieger, though he didn't win a state championship. He was third as a senior and went on to a college career at Georgia Southern. Krieger went pro and made it onto the PGA Tour, qualifying for three U.S. Opens, the last in 2000 at Pebble Beach, Calif.

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