

## Georgia TFXC Coaching Collective Interview-Shelly Cranford of Bleckley County

Coach Shelly Cranford is entering his 35<sup>th</sup> year of coaching at Bleckley County, his alma mater. Under his tutelage, his Cross Country boys and girls have won 7 State Cross Country titles and 54 Region titles. In Track, his high school boys and girls have won 15 Region titles and 2 State titles, and his middle school boys and girls have won 40 Region titles and 7 State titles. He has done all this at a school that is outside the Metro Atlanta area, in Cochran, Georgia.

### --What made you want to get into coaching?

Coach Cranford: I got into coaching because I wanted to give something back to my hometown school, Bleckley County High School, that I didn't really have when I was in school, and that was a distance coach. I ran all 4 years of my high school career, back in the early 80s, but distance running wasn't a very big thing back then, especially in Middle/South Georgia. We had good track coaches, but for us distance runners, we pretty much just trained ourselves, either making up our own workouts from day to day or trying to do something we might have read in a running magazine or article. After graduation, I ran cross country and track for 4 years at the University of Georgia, majoring in Health and Physical Education. Upon graduation, the only school system that I ever had any desire to coach/teach in was Bleckley County. I couldn't see myself coaching anywhere else, even though there was no guarantee that I would get hired back in my hometown of Cochran. Our head football coach/athletic director at this time, Coach Jimmy Kilpatrick, who taught and coached me when I was in high school, "went to bat" for me (even though I didn't know it at this time), and I was hired to teach and coach for the Royals, and I have been here ever since (starting my 35<sup>th</sup> year). I've always taken pride in being from a small town and having the opportunity to show kids that, even if you are from some small town like Cochran, Georgia, you can dream big, and you can chase your dreams, never knowing where that might lead you in life.

### --What were some of the lessons you learned early on in your coaching career?

Coach Cranford: One of the earliest lessons I learned in my coaching career is that if you, as the coach, don't go to bat for your own team, then most of the time, no one else will either. Administrators, ADs, other teachers, business leaders in the community, parents, etc., are way more willing to help, work with you, donate money and other program necessities when they see and know that you are passionate and care about what you are doing. If they know it means something to you, then there is a way greater chance that it will mean something to them as well.

Another early lesson I learned is that success isn't always equated with winning. Everyone likes to win, and winning is a big part of athletics for kids and coaches, sometimes too much. Winning may make you, as a coach, happy for a brief time, but true joy comes when you see kids/teams experience success in their own way because of the hard work, dedication, commitment, and sacrifice that they have bought into while a part of your program. Sometimes that includes winning championships, but many times it is experienced when a kid/team has done the very best that they could do with the talent(s) that they have been blessed with and have maximized while under your leadership.

A third early lesson I learned, and wish I had learned it earlier, is that it is ok to ask other coaches for their help or expertise. Asking questions is not a sign of weakness or ignorance but one of strength and a desire to learn more about something that is important to you. Just because a person ran track/cross country, or played some other sport while in high school and/or college, that doesn't automatically make them a great coach. Sometimes, in fact, the coaches who didn't do a sport at a very high level turn out to be some of the best coaches because they don't think they know it all, and they are not afraid to inquire from others who have more experience from a coaching point of view. There is not just one training plan that works for every program and every runner. Find what works best for you and the kids you coach, and know that the day-to-day experience of coaching can sometimes be the best teacher in helping you to become a better and more efficient coach.

--Who are some coaches you've coached against that you've always respected and admired?

Coach Cranford: The first coach that comes to mind is Coach Jeff Gaither. Coach Gaither was actually my cross country and distance coach for 2 of the years that I ran at the University of Georgia. When he left Georgia, he was at The Darlington School for many years and was very helpful to me early in my coaching career. Any time I ever asked him for advice, he was always willing to share training information or other helpful hints with me. I distinctly remember asking him about his training philosophy for high school runners, and he took the time to write/type out for me his entire season training plan that he had used, or was using, while coaching at Darlington during that time. While my kids at that time weren't able to duplicate everything that his kids were doing, it gave me a blueprint of how to go about drawing up my own training plan that would be best suited for the kids I had at that time.

The second coach who has been really helpful over the years is Coach John McCartney, long time Archer coach, who just recently took a job in the White Co. School System. Coach McCartney and myself also go back to my Dawgs days at Georgia. Coach McCartney ran cross country and track at UGA and graduated from UGA a few years before I was there, but from time to time he would come back to run with us at practice, and most of the time would smoke us in whatever workout we were doing that day! My friendship with him started back then and continues to this day. I have always been amazed at his knowledge of running/training and how he was so knowledgeable about the intricate details of training, many of which he has shared with me over the years. Getting advice from coaches like him has been invaluable during my 35-year coaching career.

The final coach who has been a big help and inspiration to me over my career has been, and still is, Coach Ron Clanton. I first met Coach Clanton when he was at Westover High School in Albany, and I always admired his passion for coaching, and he was the first coach that I remember coaching against who I felt like really cared about cross country for cross country's sake. Back in those days in South Georgia, many cross country coaches were "coaching" cross country just because they were told to do so by their AD, but not Coach Clanton. I learned early on that there was something different about him, something that made me want to be like him. When he left Westover, he went to Peachtree Ridge for many years and retired from there after a long and distinguished career. He ended up moving to Dublin after retirement, started coaching again at Trinity Christian, and because of that, I was able to really get to know him even better because of Dublin's close proximity to Cochran. As many of you know, especially

you older coaches like myself, Coach Clanton has the distinction of having a cross country runner qualify for Footlocker Nationals 3x during his career, Josh Brickell 2x at Peachtree Ridge and Jacob McLeod 1x at Trinity. Coach Clanton, like Coach Gaither and Coach McCartney, has been very helpful to me during my career by sharing his training philosophies/plans that he has used during his career and always being willing to answer any questions I might have about the many different aspects of distance running.

--What are your favorite things about coaching?

Coach Cranford: I love the day-to-day interactions that I have with my team. I coach both middle school and high school, so I get the honor and pleasure of coaching kids from the time they enter middle school(6<sup>th</sup> grade) until they graduate from high school. I have had kids who ran cross country all 7 years(we call it the "Super 7" club), but a majority of my kids have come out at different times during their schooling career, gave cross country a try, and many of them stuck with me from that time on until graduation, even though, like every coach and program experiences, there are some who decide for different reasons that running is no longer something they care to pursue. I am the only cross country/distance coach here at Bleckley Co. so kids are stuck with me(good or bad) in cross country and distance track their entire MS/HS running career! I usually have between 75-100 kids every year who run cross country, so hearing their stories every day is something I look forward to because you never know what you are going to hear from one day to the next, especially from middle schoolers(ha)!

For those kids who stick with me, there is also no greater joy than seeing their hard work pay off, either during a season or from one season to the next. Success is not always defined by "winning" or "placing in the top ?." Success comes in so many different forms, and every kid who runs can experience their own success and "win" their own race, whether that means running a 4:20 mile or running a 9:58 mile. Success is seeing something through and not giving up when things get tough and hard, and when you see that, as a coach, it makes every minute you put in worthwhile.

The final favorite thing about coaching that I truly enjoy is taking kids to places/races they have never been to before and exposing them to cities and states outside of Cochran, Georgia. Bleckley Co. is not a big county, and in fact, we are one of the smaller, poorer counties in the state of Georgia, but that doesn't keep us from travelling all over the state and country in cross country and track. The kids work hard, and I try to reward that hard work by giving them opportunities that they may not normally get otherwise. Just this past year, we took cross country/track trips to North Carolina, Florida, Alabama, Boston, and Arcadia, California. As a coach, your sport is what you make it, so make it something great that will make a difference in the lives of the kids you coach.

--What are some areas that you think you've improved in from when you started?

Coach Cranford: Organization – This should be one of the top priorities for any coach, from the day-to-day practice routine to hosting cross country/track meets. A lack of organizational skills will leave you, the kids you coach, and other teams who come to your home meets way more frustrated and stressed out, especially when it doesn't have to be this way. Number one is go to practice every day knowing exactly what you are doing that day and have it written down in a way that is easy for you and your kids to understand and follow. Early on in my coaching career, I might have had in my head what that day's

practice was going to be, but having to spend 5-10 minutes explaining it to the team every day will mentally wear you out in a hurry as a coach. You also waste a lot of time if you are not very organized, and it is easy to turn a 60-minute practice into a 90-120 minute ordeal. If necessary, have a timeline for practice each day, knowing exactly what you are going to be doing at a certain time and knowing how long each part of the workout will take. Have/develop a system, explain to your team how it works, and then enjoy practice every day to a greater degree than you ever thought possible.

--What do you think about the state of Track and Field/Cross Country now compared to when you starting coaching?

Coach Cranford: From looking at all the data and results, it's pretty easy to see how much the quality and quantity of performances in cross country/track and field has improved over my coaching career, which spans back into the late 80s. Georgia has always had quality, but it is amazing how many high level performances there are every year in Georgia across all events, with many of Georgia's top performances also being in the top 10 in the nation on a yearly basis. Continued top level coaching and high caliber meets being held in Georgia and across the U.S., along with Georgia's top athletes being able and willing to travel to these meets, creates a continued environment that keeps Georgia's top athletes at the top of many of the yearly event lists.

A little closer to home to where I am from, Middle/South Georgia, I am proud to say that the quality of coaching for cross country/track and field has improved dramatically over the past 25+ years, with so many more programs now being led by coaches who have a passion for cross country/track and field and who pour their heart and soul into the kids that they are coaching. For anyone who has been in education and coaching very long, we know that there is a high correlation between passion and results. Whether it's teaching in the classroom, or coaching in the sporting arena, kids pick up real quick if their teacher/coach really cares about what they are doing, and the results of that passion/lack of passion will show accordingly, academic-wise and athletic-wise. Georgia is blessed to have so many high quality coaches scattered across our great state, coaches who are willing to share their knowledge and experiences with other coaches, helping to make cross country/track and field better across all classes and organizations. We definitely have seen this since Sectionals got added to track and field several years ago, and I have no doubt we'll see the same results in cross country once Sectionals is implemented starting in the fall of 2024.

--What makes you still get excited about coaching?

Coach Cranford: I still get so excited about coaching every year because with each new season comes an opportunity to be a difference-maker in the lives of so many young people. I am constantly amazed at how many kids are still willing to run/jump/throw in 4D (discipline, desire, determination, dedication), willing to sacrifice many things in their life in order to pursue being the best that they can be in cross country and/or track and field. To see a kid enter your program from ground zero, and to see where they end up at the end of their season or career, makes coaching so worthwhile. With so many distractions in today's world, mainly social media, it's refreshing to see kids involved in sports the way they were when I was in school, where you played sports because you loved the sport, you loved competing, and you loved being with your friends and teammates who shared the same goals and dreams that you did. For some, that meant chasing a college scholarship, but for the majority, it meant just competing for the sake of competing and representing your school and hometown the best you could. I truly believe that coaching, like teaching, is a calling and not just something that a person should go into because they

can't think of anything better to do. I have been very blessed over the past 35 years to get to coach so many wonderful kids here at Bleckley County, my alma mater.

--Any advice for Track and Field/Cross Country coaches who are early in their careers?

Coach Cranford-Have a desire/passion for working with young people and don't look at coaching like it's a job, but an opportunity to make a positive difference in a young person's life. If you do that, then the blessings and joy you receive back will be unmeasurable.

-Don't get discouraged early on if your teams are not performing up to the standard that you hope or wish for. Some coaches inherit great programs and are able to continue building on the success that was already there. For others, it may take a while to build the program up to where you envision it being. From my own personal coaching career, that journey of starting from scratch and building a program up may take years and years to accomplish, but in the end, it will be worth it. Just don't give up.

-Realize that kids still want and need discipline to be developed in their lives(even parents need it sometimes). They may buck it early on, and some may even leave your program because of your desire to develop discipline in their life, but any individual/team without discipline to do the small, and big things, will never accomplish as much as they could or reach their ultimate potential. Every kid has worth. It just takes a caring coach to bring out the potential that is found in any kid who gives any sport a try. Many kids will try to do anything you ask them to do as long as they know you care about them as their coach and make them feel like they are an important part of the team.

-Don't be too prideful to ask other coaches for help/advice. Asking for help/advice doesn't show weakness in a coach but shows strength in that they are willing to learn from others who have been where they are at and who can give advice for a given situation. There are too many resources out there so that no coach should have to be trying to figure it out on their own. There are many seasoned/knowledgeable coaches out there who are more than willing to help any coach who seeks their help/advice. Don't be afraid to ask.

-While winning is important, and any competitive person wants to win, don't make it the only thing that matters. The relationships and bonds that you develop with your teams will more than outweigh the championships or titles that are won. There's no greater feeling as a coach than to have one of your former team members(or their parents) just stop by to see you or to thank you for the difference that you made in their life while you were their coach. Take your calling as a coach seriously and make a difference in the lives of the young people that you coach on a daily basis.