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Track star Muppy Gragg on the way to the Ivy League

By Jon Kingdon



Muppy Gragg at last week's graduation. Photos Gint Federas

As the epitome of a student-athlete, Muppy Gragg stands tall in both arenas. With an academic record that has her headed to the Ivy League next year, Gragg had a track season that Acalanes head track coach John Crain described as "the best anyone has had in the history of track and field at Acalanes High School."

Let's get this out of the way first - where did the name Muppy come from? Muppy's given name is Ariana. Says Muppy: "It came about when I was little and my parents would sing the nursery rhyme about Little Miss Muffett and it evolved into Muppy and has stayed with me throughout."

In a track career that began at the age of 7, competing soon after in the Junior Olympics, Gragg showed constant growth, concluding with a dominant senior year. "I began with the Diablo Valley Track Club at the age of 7," says Gragg. "My sister was on the team so I followed in her footsteps. I was always fast and (an)

early win for me was at the Lafayette Reservoir Race."

Though performing exclusively in track now, Gragg did play soccer, ran cross country and like most of the kids in the area, did some swimming. Gragg played soccer through her sophomore year but reluctantly gave it up to concentrate on track: "I loved soccer and loved the team but I strained my quad muscle and kept re-straining it and it took a month out of my track season so to avoid further injuries, I focused exclusively on track."

A successful athletic career does not come about by itself. Much of it starts with family. This was very evident to Crain: "The constant support that Muppy gets from her family is unbelievably positive. She can do so much in track because of their support. All athletes need a comfort zone and that comfort zone for Muppy is her family."

Gragg echoes that sentiment: "My family has been so supportive of me. Even my grandparents come to my meets and my sister and my parents have been there for my whole career."

Besides her family, Gragg credits both the city of Lafayette and Acalanes High School: "The whole community has helped me to become who I am. All my teachers have been supportive in everything I did. They want you to like what you're doing and to succeed at it." With great appreciation for the academics at Acalanes, Gragg had a GPA that balanced with the excellence she displayed on the field. Gragg singled out her geology teacher, Richard Kravitz, for special attention: "He is an inspirational teacher. Besides being a fine teacher, he was always concerned about us as individuals."

There has been a long line of coaches that has led to Gragg's track success: Darrin Nuetz, Ed Hollshwander, Ed Miller, Coach Crain, Chris Clark, Scott Brady-Smith, and Grace and Sunny Upshaw.

With a practice schedule that stretches out over the entire year, balancing the time in training and school work is not easy for most students but Gragg found the discipline required in track carried over to her academics: "Actually, the time demands of track helped me stay on track with school because I knew to get right on to my homework and it did not allow me to procrastinate and made me organize my time and plan out my day and my study time as well."

All of this came together for a dominant year of performance for Gragg competing in 11 different events: 200 meters - 25.26 (school record); 400 meters - 56.98; 800 meters - 2:18.65; 100 hurdles - 15.64; 300 hurdles - 43.77 (school record); shot put - 28'10.5"; Javelin - 78'6"; High Jump - 5'2"; Long jump - 18" 1.5; 4x100 (school record); 4x400 meters; a third place finish in the heptathlon at the Arcadia Multi-Invitational in Los Angeles and a prestigious mention in the USA Track Newsletter.

It's the satisfaction in the competition that drives Gragg: "I've always been able to push myself and was always motivated to win the event. I love competing and it helps me to do better in the sport."

Crain agrees with Gragg's self-assessment: "Muppy's strength is her competitiveness. When she is on the track, she competes to win. At the state meet, she held up against the best athletes in the nation. She can go as far as she wants to go in track and field."

Gragg's next academic and athletic pursuits will begin next year at Dartmouth College where she is considering a major in environmental studies. Says Gragg: "I really liked the coach and I met some members of the team. I like how they stress the outdoors with the Dartmouth Outing Club."

Crain brings it all together with his assessment of Gragg's character: "She is a quiet leader who led by performance and example. She did not flaunt her abilities. She was well liked by her teammates and got along great with everyone."



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