

Chinese coach a northern light

BY BOB FLORENCE, THE STARPHOENIX MARCH 30, 2009



Mingpu Wu (right), originally from China, coaches Evan Naytowhow of Montreal Lake during the Saskatoon Kinsmen indoor track and field meet

Photograph by: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix,

Montreal Lake Cree Nation had a team of 28 athletes at the recent Saskatoon Kinsmen indoor track and field meet. They were wall-to-wall at the Saskatoon Field House; girls running, boys jumping. Two vanloads of kids made the 3 1/2-hour trip from the North, all of them turned on to sport by their phys-ed teacher who is from the Far East.

Mingpu Wu is his name. Everyone calls him Ming.

"Look at that," said coach Ming, standing in the infield at the field house and watching the peewee boys compete in shot put, with the field of 21 entries in the 10-and-under age group now down to the top-eight qualifiers. "Those are three of our boys in the final." One of the Montreal Lake boys, Evan Naytowhow, finished third.

Ming dynasty this isn't. Not yet anyway. But this much is certain: In his more than 30 years of coaching, Ming has a history of getting firecracker results.

After completing a masters degree, he went on to work at one of the major phys-ed institutions in China. He was promoted to the national track and field team -- a specialist in javelin -- and helped prepare Chinese throwers in the run-up to the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. When he came to Canada in 1993, arriving in Winnipeg for a one-year term as a visiting scholar, Ming was recruited by head coach Bruce Pirnie to serve as a jumps coach with the University of Manitoba Bisons.

Ming's year in Winnipeg extended to another, by now joined in Canada by his wife and son. After winning two straight national championships with the Bisons, Ming stuck around for a third year and helped the Herd go three-for-three.

"Working with Bruce and the team was amazing," said Ming. "I enjoyed every moment teaching and coaching at university." Said Pirnie: "He's a phenomenal coach, but more than that he's a tremendous individual. He's a quality person, just a great personality."

Ming would be coaching in Winnipeg even now if it was up to Pirnie and the track and field community in Manitoba, if they could manage to cobble together enough to compensate Ming for his services as they had been doing before.

Instead, Ming got a job with Quality Vending and Coffee Services of Winnipeg and worked for the company in China for two years. He went to technical college in Winnipeg, earning a degree in computer technology, and signed on with a local high tech firm. It crashed.

In 2001, he saw an ad in the Winnipeg Free Press. Phys ed teacher wanted at Senator Allen Bird Memorial School in Montreal Lake, the ad read. "I didn't know where that was," he said, but he applied anyway. And then look what he did. Ming started a track and field club in Montreal Lake. "To promote good health and good lifestyle," he said.

Charmane Naytowhow had never done javelin before in her life. "Stick throwing," she called it. Within three years, she developed into a provincial high school champion and a gold medallist in the event at the North American Indigenous Games. Competing against athletes who were two and three years older, she finished third in javelin at junior nationals. "Two important things about Charmane," Ming said. "One, she is smart. She picks things up fast. Two, is her commitment. She was always there at practice."

Ming returned to Manitoba in 2005, landed a few national team assignments with Pirnie and was working in the school system in Winnipeg until last fall when he was lured again to Montreal Lake, back by popular demand.

"There is just something about the way he connects with the kids," said Delia Naytowhow, a councillor at Montreal Lake. "It's his attitude, his spirit. He is a gift to our community."

Besides teaching phys-ed, Ming runs track and field practice each day after school and accompanies the team at weekend meets. "I'm alone," he said. "I have the time."

His wife Hiuping Hu, who was a two-time college champion in China as a basketball player, and son Junwu have stayed behind in Winnipeg where the family has a house. His wife is a head caretaker with the Winnipeg school division and his son works as a chartered accountant. Ming makes it home to Winnipeg whenever he can, on school breaks and holidays.

"I have a commitment to Montreal Lake," he said. "The support from the community is great -- from the school, the band, the parents." The response by the youth is rousing.

"We play games. We have fun. The other kids see that and say, 'Can I come, too?'"

"I have a dream," Ming said. "One day an athlete from here goes to the Olympics."

"I have a vision. I want each one of them to develop to be the best they can be, not as athletes, as people."

