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SPORTS

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IN MY OPINION

CHANGING HISTORY TO CHANGING LIVES



University of North Carolina

Reggie McAfee, shown celebrating a win during his days at North Carolina, was the first African American runner to break four minutes in the mile. While he finished first in this race, oddly in his historic moment, he finished second.

After making his name running, McAfee using sport to give back

BY SCOTT FOWLER

Forty years ago, Reggie McAfee ran the first mile in less than 4 minutes ever run by an African-American.

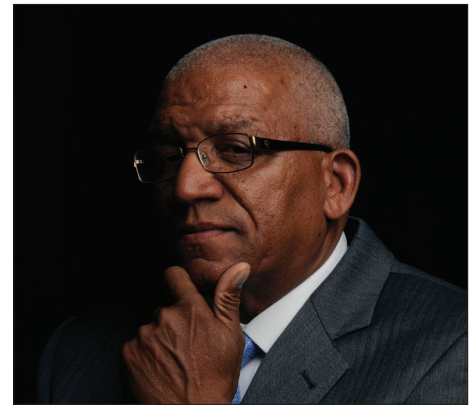
Now McAfee runs a far different race. He tries to positively affect the lives of as many young people in the Charlotte area as he can through a non-profit foundation called "Cross-Country For Youth," which he started in 2006.

The foundation recently earned a national award for its work. It concentrates

on making fourth through eighth graders better citizens and runners through a twice-a-week afterschool program held every fall in Charlotte and attended by hundreds.

McAfee, 63, has taken it one step at a time throughout his life, setting goals and determinedly working toward them. While not always the most talented in his field, he has long had an uncommon focus. "Let me tell you — you will not outwork me," he said. "I'm just telling you a fact."

McAfee has played many roles — champion runner, Xerox salesman, father, coach, organizer and cheerleader



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Over the years, Reggie McAfee found success in running and in business. Now, he's found success helping the youths of Charlotte with a nonprofit organization he started.

among them. And while some bemoan today's youth, McAfee insists that the kids will be all right.

He sees his role in his afterschool program — which starts each session with a 30-minute, character-building presentation about a trait like perseverance or sportsmanship and then concludes with 60 minutes of running — as something like that of a master gardener.

"This is about planting the seeds of encouragement inside people's lives," McAfee said. "I like to say we plant the seeds and let God do the rest. Those seeds will germinate. They will grow. And they will change the face of our community. A lot of people think we can't change it. I think we can."

WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

While McAfee has lived in Charlotte since 1980, he grew up in Cincinnati. "We moved around a lot," McAfee said. "I came from a single-parent home and my mom was just kind of raising us by herself. There were six of us and that was challenging. She was just barely making it, so it was difficult. She had a couple of jobs."



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Reggie McAfee started running competitively in middle school. It paved his way to college, and now retired from the business world, it occupies retirement, too. He started “Cross-Country For Youth,” a Charlotte-area nonprofit, in 2006.

He began running as a kid, doing laps around a nearby fence. He started running competitively in middle school. One early race still sticks out.

“I was running in a 2-mile relay,” he said. “When I got the baton last, I must have been about 10th. I didn’t know a lot about pacing then, I just knew I had to catch the group. So I picked it up. I didn’t catch all of them, but I caught about eight of them. When I crossed the finish line, I fell down. And this track official picks me up, looks at me and says to me, ‘Son, one day you’re going to be a great runner.’

“That statement took root in my spirit.

It’s what we try to teach now in the program — that words of encouragement can take you a long way, just like words of discouragement can take you a long way.”

At the time, very few distance runners — especially in America — were black. Most African-Americans who ran track were sprinters. But McAfee always gravitated toward the longer events, saying he “just never bought into” the perception blacks should be sprinters. He found some inspiration in Kip Keino of Kenya, a black runner who won Olympic gold and silver medals in 1968 at Mexico City in two distance events.

“This is my baby and my vision. But I’m sure not doing it by myself.”

REGGIE MCAFEE
ON CROSS-COUNTRY FOR
YOUTH, HIS NON-PROFIT

“As a youth, I would be running and just keep repeating the word, ‘Keino, Keino, Keino,’” McAfee recalled.

McAfee became a two-time Ohio state champion in cross country. He was recruited by Tennessee, but didn’t get a qualifying score on the ACT. Tennessee’s coaches suggested he go to Brevard College for two years with the idea of transferring to Tennessee after that.

By the time McAfee had finished those two years, however, he had changed his mind and wanted to go to North Carolina. He was a standout there, although he was sometimes overshadowed by another excellent Tar Heel distance runner, Tony Waldrop.

Indeed, on the day in May 1973 when McAfee first ran the mile in less than 4 minutes — at a meet in Raleigh with Duke and N.C. State — he didn’t win the race. He finished second to Waldrop. Although becoming the first African-American less than 4 minutes had been a goal for years, he didn’t enjoy it much initially.

“I was so upset that I finished second that I really couldn’t appreciate the fact that I broke four minutes,” McAfee said. “I’m just way too competitive.”

Over time, however, McAfee grew to appreciate the feat. He went under 4 minutes about a half-dozen more times, beating Waldrop in some races but losing others to his college teammate.

Said Jim Beatty, who was the first man in the world to run a mile in less than 4 minutes indoors in 1962 and is a long-time Charlotte resident and good friend of McAfee’s: “It could well be that Reggie didn’t get the notoriety he deserved because he was running alongside the fabled Tony Waldrop. But Reggie was a tremendous middle-distance runner. He had a good combination of speed and stamina and quite a range of distances. But what he’s done with his running program in Charlotte may be even more impressive.”

COMING FULL CIRCLE

It was Waldrop, McAfee’s old teammate, who encouraged him to apply for the national award — called the Giant

Steps Awards and given by the National Consortium for Academics and Sports — and nominated the Cross-Country For Youth organization for it. Waldrop is now the provost at the University of Central Florida and has stayed in touch with McAfee over the years. “He’s just a great guy,” Waldrop said. “As solid as they come.”

McAfee began CCY in 2006, shortly after taking an early retirement from Xerox. He had worked for Xerox for 27 years, ending up as one of its top salesman. He had dabbled in coaching cross country over the years and had frequently told his wife and two children he would like to give back something more to the sport when he had time.

Suddenly, he had time. He threw himself into his new nonprofit organization, signing up volunteers to teach the same program in exactly the same way at nu-

merous schools around Charlotte. “This is my baby and my vision,” McAfee said, “But I’m sure not doing it by myself. We have a great board and great volunteers — but we could always use more.”

The program helps out students like Kamali Singleton, a rising eighth-grader at Randolph Middle School in Charlotte. Said Singleton: “I like cross country because you can take something out of it and use it in your life. It has changed me. For example, if there is a person on my heels in a race, instead of giving up, I persevere and finish strong. I recently had a problem learning some geometry in math class, and I tried to show discipline and persevere in the same kind of way.”

McAfee’s fitness program will work with somewhere around 475-625 kids this fall in Charlotte. In recent years, McAfee said, about 40 percent of the kids in the

program have been African-American, 40 percent white and 20 percent Hispanic.

“God gave me a gift for running,” McAfee said. “And to be able to come full circle and share that with kids — to give them the same thing — that’s just kind of cool.”

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Want to get involved?

Reggie McAfee’s nonprofit organization “Cross-Country For Youth” is in need of both volunteers and financial support. Go to www.crosscountryforyouth.org to get involved, make a donation or contact McAfee directly.

On Aug.13 at 6 p.m., the organization will hold a volunteer kickoff event for this fall’s afterschool programs at the Morrison Regional Library in Charlotte.

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