

Neely Spence wins Cross Country Championships

by Howard Richman

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It was an exciting fall for eleventh grade Shippensburg homeschooler Neely Spence, 16, shown in the photo below with her father. First she won the PIAA cross country title, as a member of the Shippensburg High School team, then she won the Foot Locker Northeast Regional Cross Country Championship, and finally she placed 8th, nationally, in the Foot Locker Cross Country championship in California.



Neely is the daughter of former Olympic marathoner and current Shippensburg University cross country coach Steve Spence and his wife Kirsten, a certified teacher. Steve and Kirsten first met when they were cooling down after both running a 10 mile road race in Chambersburg, when Kirsten started talking to Steve in order to get training advice!

Together Steven and Kirsten have been homeschooling Neely for the past 8 years along with her twin 13-year-old sisters who now play basketball on a school team, as well as a three-year-old brother, who Kirsten pushes in a racing stroller when she practices running.

Two years ago, after competing in the Foot Locker Northeast Regional championship in 9th grade and placing 14th, Neely organized six of the local participants into a club team under the sponsorship of the Cumberland Valley Athletic Club so that they could prepare together for the following year's race. The girls trained together as often as three times per week, but when race day came, Neely was suffering from an undiagnosed iron deficiency and only placed 19th. Since then, she has been taking liquid iron and B vitamin supplements under a doctor's care, and has completely recovered.

Meanwhile Steve was trying to work with the school district to gain access to the Shippensburg High School cross country team for Neely. He even met with an athletic committee appointed by the school board, but still got nowhere. But after Governor Rendell signed the [Equal Access Bill](#) in November 2005, they had to let her on the team. First she met several times with the head cross country coach Randy Holtry who then made a special effort to get the other girls to reach out to Neely. Neely told reporter Tony Fritz for the *Carlisle Sentinel*:

"I was pretty nervous to go the first day," she says. "All the kids had known each other their whole lives, and here I come in this outsider."

Holtry encouraged the other girls to reach out to Spence at the first practice, and her nervousness evaporated immediately as the girls made friends....

The rest is history. Neely ran for Shippensburg High School and won the PIAA state high school cross country championship on November 5. Then she ran with the other members of her Cumberland Valley Athletic Club and won first place in the Foot Locker Northeast Regional Championship on November 28. Most recently, on December 9, she placed eighth in the nation in the Foot Locker National Cross Country championship in California. After that she told Harrisburg *Patriot News* reporter James Phillips:

"I'm going to take a mental break now and enjoy the holidays," Spence said. "Next up for me is training for the Nike outdoor championships in June.... I'm just going to concentrate solely on cross country this year and run in some open collegiate races."