

Stepp signs two Black Bears to help build Alice Lloyd program



By JOHN HENSON

Harlan County Schools

Gary Stepp wants to build a winning cross country program at Alice Lloyd College. He traveled to Harlan County on Thursday to find some winners to help the process.

Stepp signed two Harlan County High School seniors, Blain Grubbs and Tyler Turner, to join the school's new cross country team.

Stepp, who is also Alice Lloyd's athletic director and sports information director, said Harlan County will be one of the schools at the center of his recruiting efforts.

"Coach (Ryan) Vitatoe has an incredible program. It's one of the best in the mountains," Stepp said Thursday during the signing ceremony in the school's atrium. "We're a mountain school and we recruit in the mountains."

Stepp said several reasons led him to sign the two Harlan County runners.

"They are both solid students. The number one priority for me is that they each work hard academically and that they each earn their degree," Stepp said. "Two, they both impress me with their desire to work hard and with their appreciation for an opportunity to run on the collegiate level. Third, they are both part of an elite program at Harlan County. Coach Vitatoe has done an excellent job in building the Black Bears into a powerhouse in the mountains, and I see the quality student-athletes he produces."

Grubbs and Turner were both members of the cross country squad that finished second in the region last fall. Both are also members of the track team, running in the 4x800 meter relay and 1 mile races.

Both were impressed by the small Knott County college during visits to Pippa Passes.

“It’s a good Christian school, and I like the people there,” Turner said. “It reminded me of here.”

“Everyone was nice and friendly,” Grubbs said. “I knew I would like it when I visited. It’s not too big.”

Grubbs has been a member of the cross country and track teams at HCHS for three years.

“We have a lot of good, young runners. It was good being a part of it,” Grubbs said.

“We feel like we helped build a foundation,” Turner said.

Vitaoe expects both runners to continue improving in college.

“Blain was one of our original members,” he said. “He’s always had potential to be a very good runner. He should be able to contribute right away and fit it with what coach Stepp is trying to build.

“Tyler is in his first full year, but he has a lot of potential and talent. He’s just now scratching the surface of what he can do. I think he’ll grow as he gets further into the sport.”

Alice Lloyd is an NAIA school and competes in the Kentucky Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (KIAC).