

Marshall, Steed excel for Palmyra

By Reuben Frank
BCT sports writer

PRINCETON — It was the first day of school at Palmyra High School in the fall of 1996 and eighth-grader Natasha Marshall saw a girl she didn't know sitting at her lunch table.

"I thought, 'Maybe I should go over and say hi,'" Marshall recalled yesterday. "We started talking and discovered we had a lot in common. We just started doing a lot of things together and became really good friends."

Marshall and Kari Steed have been inseparable since.

"If you see her somewhere," Steed said yesterday, "chances are you'll see me there, too."

Marshall and Steed, now seniors, have helped turn the Palmyra girls track team into one of New Jersey's top small-school programs. Yesterday, despite limiting themselves to one individual event each, they helped Palmyra to a best-ever third-place finish at the state Group 1 indoor championships at Jadwin Gym.

But in a few months, these best friends will become bitter rivals.

GIRLS TRACK

Marshall and Steed, both ranked among the top five students in their class, were both accepted on early decision to attend Ivy League colleges next year. Marshall will run for Princeton and Steed for Cornell.

"We could go another 20 years and never get one like them," said Palmyra girls coach Claudia Potor. "To have two girls from a very small school like Palmyra, the same year, both commit to Ivy League schools is unbelievable."

Marshall won state Group 1 titles last spring in the 100- and 400-meter hurdles and has run 14.8 and 1:03.9. Steed has won three state titles in the 400 dash, one indoors and two outdoors, and has a P.R. of 57.34. They've also teamed up on three state championship 1,600 relay teams.

Led by Steed and Marshall, Palmyra has enjoyed unprecedented success for a Burlington County Group 1 girls program, placing second in both the state Group 1 meet last spring and the state relays this winter and third yesterday.

But here are the most impressive numbers: Marshall ranks first in her class and scored 1,350 on her

SAT. Steed ranks fifth and scored 1,170 on the SAT. Both plan on engineering majors to go with track careers in college.

"I'm really proud of both of us," said Steed, second in the 400 yesterday. "It wasn't easy to achieve. A lot of work went into it. We're always encouraging each other, always pushing each other."

Marshall placed fourth yesterday in the 55 hurdles. Then she and Steed teamed up with Jade Burroughs and Kristen Papenburg to run second in the 1,600 relay in a season-best 4:12.18.

"We've had a lot of fun," Marshall said. "It's been a great four years. We're in all the same classes and we study together all the time — we've had a silent competition but a friendly competition. We definitely push each other — academically and athletically. We've always been there for each other."

What happens when Cornell and Princeton race each other? What happens when Marshall and Steed get ready to take a relay handoff and see each other on the track?

"We talk about it all the time," Steed said. "It'll be fun — as long as we're not running the same leg."

And if they are?

"It'll be kind of intimidating seeing her there," Marshall said. "We probably shouldn't look at each other, but we'll probably look over and say hi."

Also in Group 1, Burlington Township junior Lisa Smith was third in the high jump at 5-0.

Cherokee senior Michelle Bilicki ran an indoor personal-best of 5:18.43 to place third in the Group 4 1,600. Her time is fifth-fastest in county history and fastest in seven years, since Liz Moore of Shawnee ran 5:09.41 in 1994.

"Actually, I'm not happy at all with my race," said Bilicki, who ran 5:07.7 last spring. "I went out too slow (2:40 first 800). But it's only my second mile and I have a month before Easterns (Feb. 27 at the Armory). I feel like I can run a lot faster by then."

Cherokee senior Jessica Caccamo was fifth in the shot put with a personal-best throw of 37-2¼, best by a Cherokee girl since Bridget Sedivi threw 39-2 in 1991.

Shawnee senior Dana Palumbo ran sixth in the Group 3,200 in 11:41.81, No. 7 on the county indoor list.