

SPORTS HEADLINES

GIRLS TRACK: Teammates and thoughts of cousin support Razo through the hardest eight laps she's ever run

By Reuben Frank
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Every step was a challenge. Every second was a battle. Every inch was a triumph.

Getting through this weekend's sectional track meet was one of the toughest things Cherokee High School senior Melissa Razo has ever done. Or ever will do.

Not because she hadn't trained properly. Not because the other runners were so fast. Not because of the tendinitis that's been ravaging her shins.

No, the pain Razo felt this weekend went much deeper.

Razo's cousin, Monica Rodriguez, was one of three women killed in the Pier 34 collapse 11 days ago on the Philadelphia waterfront.

Razo, who turned 19 yesterday, and Rodriguez, 21, a Cherry Hill native, were very close. And her cousin's death left Razo emotionally drained, physically exhausted, and hardly in condition to go to a major track meet and run against some of New Jersey's fastest two-milers.

"It was a really rough week," Razo said. "My cousin was more like my sister. After my sister moved away, we became really close. She was always very positive, always happy, always there for me."

And her death on May 18 was devastating to Razo, who this spring emerged as one of South Jersey's top distance runners. "I didn't run at all for a while," she said. "I tried to do a workout Tuesday and I couldn't finish it. I really didn't think I'd be able to run at sectionals."

Razo not only ran, she placed fifth Friday in a very competitive 3,200-meter run in the Group 4 meet at Buena Regional High School. With teammate Erin Chiarulli alongside her stride for stride and providing emotional support, Razo qualified for the state championships for the second straight year.

Razo crossed the line in 11:41.0, only nine seconds off her personal-best set a couple weeks earlier at the Olympic Conference meet.

"I've never been so proud of any runner," Cherokee distance coach Chris Tarello said. "My God, for that kid to go out there and battle like that for eight laps after everything

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"My God, for that kid to go out there and battle like that for eight laps after everything she had been through, after not even training for a week and a half? That was incredible. If anybody in that race had a reason to quit it was her and she ran awesome. I got choked up just watching it."

Razo has been an inspirational runner all season for Cherokee, whose girls distance team has become one of New Jersey's best under Tarello's guidance.

She was named the Most Courageous Runner at the Woodbury Relays after helping Cherokee win the 3,200-meter relay and place second in the distance medley despite chronic tendinitis that makes running and training very painful. Going into sectional weekend, her 11:31.98 was 16th-fastest in the state.

But after Rodriguez died, Razo was too distraught to think about running. She skipped the East Coast Relays, although she did accompany her teammates to Morristown, and as late as Thursday she was still unsure whether she would race on Friday.

"All week, I didn't know what I was going to do," Razo said. "Tarello told me not to even think about it, not to think about running, and we'd just wait and make a decision.

"But I talked to my mom a lot and she kept saying that my cousin would want me to run. My cousin was always strong and she always went after whatever she wanted and I know she would have wanted me to be out there."

This is an unusually close-knit Cherokee team, and after the tragedy Razo's teammates provided a constant cocoon of support around their friend. Many attended Rodriguez's funeral last Wednesday at the Roman Catholic Church of St. Mary in Cherry Hill.

"It hurt so much to see her so upset," said teammate Michelle Bilicki, who is seeded fifth in the 1,600-meter run at this weekend's state Group 4 meet. "We're all really, really close and we really didn't know what to do or what to say, but we just tried to always be around for her if she needed us.

"It's such a sad thing. Monica was a great girl - we all got to know her when she came to the Penn Relays to watch us run. I wasn't sure whether Melissa would run at sectionals - she tried to do a workout last Tuesday and halfway through broke down on the track and started crying. But she did awesome on Friday. I don't know how she did it. It's amazing she could come out and put together such a good race after everything she'd been through. I was so proud of her. We all were."

Razo said she ran because that's what Rodriguez would have wanted.

"I know she'd be happy that I ran," Razo said. "My cousin never let anything stop her from accomplishing what she wanted and that's what she would have told me, not to let anything stop me, either."

The race developed nicely for Razo. She and Chiarulli settled into fourth and fifth place, with a large gap separating them from sixth place, the final qualifying spot. There was no need to try and kick at the end to advance to states, no pressure to pass runners to continue her season. She was able to focus only on running eight laps at roughly an 87-second pace.

Still, it was a very difficult 101/2 minutes. Razo found herself crying at times during the race, only to have Chiarulli, a junior competing in her first career 3,200, comfort her.

"It was my hardest race ever," she said. "If Erin wasn't there, I probably wouldn't have made it. She talked to me the whole way and that really helped."

Razo will compete in the 3,200 at the state Group 4 meet on Friday afternoon at Egg Harbor Township High School. And she even plans on getting some training in this week.

It won't be easy.

Showing boundless courage rarely is.

"I'm still trying to deal with it," Razo said. "It's hard, but I'm just trying to stay positive. My friends have been there all the time for me and that's meant so much.

"I'm planning on getting back to running a little bit more this week. Tarello told me I've worked too hard and come too far to stop now and that's what I'm telling myself.

"My cousin never let anything stop her. If there was something she wanted to do, she went out and found a way to do it. I'll always remember her for that."

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