



Running Game

Mason's Gardner And Geer Combine Football And Distance Feat

BY CHIP MUNDY

Mason High football coach Jerry VanHavel hasn't had to worry about his players going the extra mile.

Two of his seniors, Chris Gardner and Jon Geer, are willing to give much more. They proved it in October when they joined high school gym teacher Andrew Chapin in the 26.2-mile Detroit Free Press Marathon.

It was the first marathon for all three. And it came just two days after Mason knocked off previously unbeaten Sexton 24-13 on a Homecoming Friday night for the Bulldogs.

"Those are just two great kids," VanHavel said of Gardner and Geer. "They offer everything you would want."

Even so, VanHavel was a little skeptical

when he was approached by Gardner and Geer. And it didn't necessarily have to do with football.

"I encourage all the kids to experience everything they can in high school," VanHavel said. "But at first I didn't think they'd be able to pull it off because they hadn't been training for a marathon."

Chapin had been an assistant football

coach under VanHavel and a player at Hope College. So he knew that football had to be the first priority for Gardner and Geer.

"When I mentioned it to Jerry, he said, 'You're crazy, but be sure football remains the first priority,'" Chapin said.

The interest in the Detroit Marathon began last spring when Chapin mentioned that he was going to participate. Chapin had been the girls basketball coach at Mason before his wife, Camy, gave birth to their first son, Caleb, on Sept. 23, 2009 – right around the time of the Detroit Marathon.

"Running in the Detroit Marathon had always been on my bucket list, and as long as I wasn't coaching anymore, I had the time," Chapin said.

Chapin, a gym teacher at Mason, was a football player and not a distance runner at Midland High School. But he became interested in distance running after moving to Mason. After he announced his intentions, Gardner and Geer became interested. Gardner entered the Heart of a Spartan 6K race in May and enjoyed the experience.

"Chris began bringing it up. Once I knew he was going to do it, I decided that I wanted to do it," said Geer, who has been close friends with Gardner since sixth grade.

However, the boys knew this was something that could not be taken lightly, so they joined Chapin in training over the summer. Though they never ran a full 26.2 miles, they often hit the 20-mile mark.

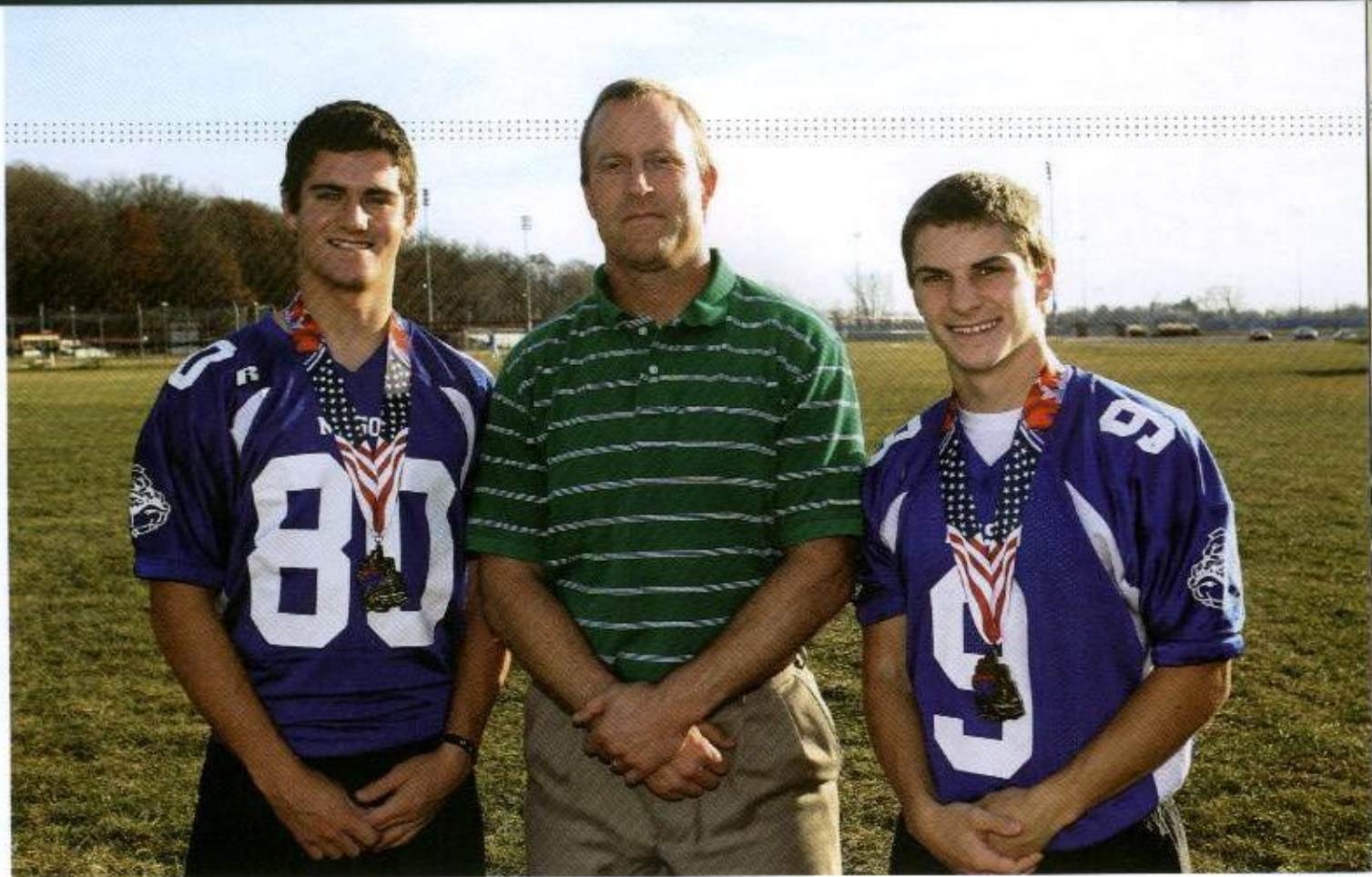
Both were members of the Mason track and field team. Geer ran the 400 and 800. And Gardner tackled the 1,600 – less than 1/26 the length of a marathon.

"I didn't expect anyone to come up to me and offer to run with me," Chapin said. "But Chris and Jon are such great kids. If anybody was going to do it, it was going to be kids like Chris and Jon."

"I've been coaching and teaching for a while, and Chris and Jon are right at the top of the list of the best kids I've been around."



Team J-A-C Mason Bulldogs Jon Geer (left) and Chris Gardner flank Mason High gym teacher and running partner Andrew Chapin after the Detroit Free Press Marathon.



Bulldog Mentality Geer and Gardner were important players this fall on Jerry VanHavel's CAAC Red football champions.

As the trio trained and became closer, they decided they wanted a team name and chose J-A-C., the first initials of Jon, Andrew and Chris. They were Team J-A-C, and Chapin said they developed some goals.

"We weren't going to walk or stop at any point, we wanted to average less than a 9-minute mile, and we wanted to be the most charismatic group out there," Chapin said. "The last goal was to run the entire marathon together."

They accomplished all four. The third was realized because the runners wore neon yellow shirts and made a point to comment on all of the signs put up by spectators and give out high-fives whenever possible. The fourth was capped when they crossed the finish line with hands held high.

The marathon wound through the streets of Detroit, over the Ambassador Bridge to Canada and back to the United States through the tunnel.

"Everything seemed pretty good for the first 20 miles, and then it got tough," Gardner said. "It was a huge adrenalin rush."

Gardner was 809th in 3 hours, 54.37 seconds, while Geer was 810th in 3:54.38 seconds and Chapin was 811th, also in 3:54.38. Gardner noted that he was slightly

faster because the timing chip in his leg was on the leg that crossed the line first, while Geer's was on his other leg.

They averaged less than nine minutes per mile in what Gardner called "a conversational pace."

Chapin got his reward around the 25th mile when the group encountered a hill.

"Of the three of us, I was the one who thought it was a really tough hill," Chapin said. "I started to slow down, and Chris and Jon said to me, 'Hey, let's go - you got this.' That was the moment - the whole story of the thing came around at that point.

"That was all that I needed to hear right there."

The accomplishment drew attention from their classmates and the Mason community.

"Probably the week before, the whole week everybody was telling us good luck," Gardner said.

"It was a really good experience," Geer said.

For Gardner, the marathon had an added significance. He had mononucleosis in his junior year and played in only one football game.

"To me, to be able to come back and play football and run in the marathon was an incredible experience," Gardner

said. "It made me feel like I came all the way back."

While Gardner and Geer are not the type to seek attention, it was nice that two football players - solid starters but not the star players - also were getting some recognition. Both are starting ends on offense, and both see action in the backfield on defense, depending on the game situation.

In the first playoff game - a 55-13 victory over Fowlerville - Geer returned an interception 18 yards for a touchdown. It was his second defensive touchdown of the game and his third overall of the season.

In an 8-1 regular season, Mason outscored its opponents 382-113, breaking the school record of 362 points set in 2008. The Bulldogs became the first Mason to score more than 417 points, including the playoffs.

No doubt, the football season will be a major memory for all the Mason football players. Gardner and Geer are no exception. But when they reflect on their senior year, it will be impossible for them not to remember Homecoming weekend and the Detroit Free Press Marathon.

"It was perfect," Gardner said. "One of the best weekends you could possibly have." □