

Women's Track & Field Earns Second Place at New England Division III Championship

February 21-22, 2014

The women's track and field team traveled to Springfield College on Friday, February 21 for the two day [New England Division III Indoor Championship](#). MIT were slight favorites over Williams College and Tufts University going into the weekend, but were depending on a few individuals doing a lot of events. There would be no room for error.

The Pentathlon was the only event contested on Friday, and with ten athletes entered and three from MIT, the Engineers expected to score well and set the tone for Saturday's competitions. Jackie Konopka '14 entered the meet as the top seed, but she was coping with an Achilles injury. Stephanie Birkhimer '14 and Stephanie Guo '17 were Pentathlon freshmen in a highly competitive Championship. The Pentathlon is comprised of five events: 60m hurdles, High Jump, Shot Put, Long Jump, and 800m. The pivotal event was the Long Jump. All three women needed to jump well to secure top scoring points. Birkhimer jumped a PR of 16-10.5 on her third attempt, but Konopka fouled her first two jumps both well over 17 feet, on her third jump she had to take a safety jump for a distance of 15-9. Entering the 800m, Konopka was in first place with a 106-point lead over Payton Dostie from Southern Maine, a very strong 800m runner. Guo sat in seventh place while Birkhimer was in ninth. The 106-point lead was not enough to hold onto first place with Payton running 2:20.25, and Konopka suffering from lack of conditioning due to her injury. However, she did garner a much needed second place and eight points based on the 10-8-6-5-4-3-2-1 scoring format. Guo ran a strong 2:27.10, finishing in fifth place overall with a score of 3160, a new MIT freshmen record.

On Saturday the Engineers entered the competition hoping to carry forward momentum from Friday's Pentathlon with 12 points to the first events of the day. In the 20 lb. Weight Throw, Ashley Wheeler '15 was not seeded to score but had the best throw in flight two, securing a place in the finals where she had a PR throw of 48-02, placing seventh. Ellen Liverpool '15, having a remarkable year, was seeded fifth in the event, but only managed 24th place.

In the Pole Vault, the premier event for the women, the expectation was to score the 20+ points for which they were seeded, but this was not to be. The normally dominant vaulting team only managed to secure seven points. Cimran Virdi '15 placed third with 11-3, and Sherry Wan '15 had PR vault of 10-10 for eighth place. In the first three events, MIT was down 17 points. In the meantime Williams managed to win both the Weight Throw and the Pole Vault.

In the Long Jump things started to look up when Veronica Scklarzewski '15 made it into finals, and finished eighth place with a jump of 16-10.5, providing a needed positive boost. However, Williams again managed big points, gaining fourth and fifth places for nine more points.

The running events on Saturday began with the Distance Medley Relay where the ladies had high hopes to move their team's energy forward with a strong showing. While MIT was seeded first thanks to the 11:55.05 performance run by Maryann

Gong '17, Jackie Brew '14, Cindy Huang '15, and Louise van den Huevel '14 at Boston University two weeks ago, it would be freshmen Nadia Lucas '17, Kendra Knittel '17, Alexandra Shade '17, and Christina Wicker '17 who would toe the line for Tech. The women finished in sixth place with a time of 12:37.38, with Williams picking up 10 more points for their first place finish. Williams' confidence grew as MIT seemed surprised by the results.

After the DMR, the team had a sense of bewilderment not quite understanding what was going on; however, refusing to give into past results, MIT looked to change the tide with the 60m hurdles. Brew, the only hurdle entry for the Engineers, stepped up and ran a strong 9.12 to win her heat and advance to the finals. Minutes later Jackie ran the 60m prelims with a time of 7.91, qualifying her for the finals in seventh position. Needing a positive result, Jackie did not disappoint, finishing second in the hurdles with PR time of 8.93, and then another PR in the 60m dash at 7.89, good for fourth place. Even better news for MIT, Williams was only able to net two points in the two events.

The 5k was the next scoring event on the track, with Elaine McVay '15, Nicole Zeinstra '16, Shivani Kaushal '15, and Heather Sweeney '16 entered in the race. While only McVay was seeded to score (ranked first), the other women were racing to pick up points as well. McVay's early pace was too slow to lose the opposition and in the latter stages of the race was unable to fend off the competition from Williams, finishing third in 17:59. Zeinstra raced with the leaders through two miles but finished in tenth at 18:35.08. Kaushal and Sweeney finished in 20th and 23rd, respectively. Williams College again took advantage, placing first and second.

Louise van den Huevel '14 and Maryann Gong '17 represented Tech in the mile and were the top two seeds, giving MIT hope for 18 points. The race got off to a slow start but van den Huevel took the lead with 400 to go, and finished first with a time of 5:01.93. Gong did not go with her teammates, allowing her opponents the opportunity to pass and getting discouraged. She fought back at the end to finish fourth with a time of 5:07.21. The 15 points provided Tech with needed points but followed the pattern of a day in which every positive performance was followed by lower than expected results.

The High Jump was the highlight of the meet for MIT as Jackie Konopka '14, Stephanie Guo '17 both coming back from Fridays Pentathlon and Preethi Vaidyanathan '15 all scored well above expectations. Konopka and Vaidyanathan both cleared the bar on each of their first attempts, finishing tied for 2 places with 5-3. Guo also was able to set a PR of 5-3, but with several misses at lower heights, placed fifth, giving MIT 18 points.

In the Triple Jump both Birkhimer and Michelle Johnson '15 jumped well enough to make it into finals, giving needed momentum to the team's spirit. In the finals, Birkhimer had a big PR jump of 36-2 that moved her from seventh to third, but in the end finished fifth. Johnson did not improve in finals, and finished in sixth place giving the Engineers seven points. Of course, Williams countered with another first place as well as fourth for a total of 15 points.

In the Shot Put, Isabella Stuopis '16 was seeded number one going into the competition. She started off well winning her flight and top spot going into finals.

Feeling the pressure from her opponents, Stuopis was passed and dropped to third place. Not being able to maintain her competitive edge, she did not counter and finished third.

Back on the track, racing the 800 were Huang and van den Huevel, not long after her mile victory. Huang was able to get out in a competitive position and finished third in a time of 2:19.32, while van den Huevel was fighting in the pack and finished seventh in 2:21.52 after being the top seed.

Wicker was the only competitor for MIT in the 1000, but she was the number one seed going into the race. It was hoped her 1600 anchor leg in the DMR hours earlier would not affect the 1000 performance. However, she was unable to score, finishing a disappointing 12th with a time of 3:10.53.

Returning to race in the 3k were McVay, Gong, Zeinstra, and Sweeney. Gong made a move after the first mile but couldn't hold off a Williams's competitor. She finished second with a time of 10:16.26. McVay finished 12th with a time of 10:31.60, and Zeinstra and Sweeney finished 22nd and 24th, respectively.

Going into the last two events of the meet the 4x400 relay and 4x800m relay, MIT was in a disappointing situation. Williams College was clearly in first place, and Tufts was well behind in third. In terms of points, the Engineers could not move past Williams to be first but neither could Tufts overtake them. Not wanting to give up, and pondering the importance of racing the relays, the women were given the choice whether or not to race and both teams stepped up to the challenge. The 4x400 relay team was not able to score against the talented competition. Their teammates rallied around the track, cheering and giving needed inspiration and life to the 4x800 relay team in the final event of the day. Huang, Gong, Wicker and van den Heuvel, all racing in their second or third race, provided the most impressive track race of the meet for MIT, showing the fight and strong competitive spirit of the Engineers, and winning the race from start to finish with a time of 9:43.47.

While the second place finish was a bitter disappointment to what had been an outstanding season, the Engineers must rally as they use the next two competitions, the NEICAAA Championship at Boston University and the ECAC Division III Championship at Reggie Lewis, to prepare for the NCAA Division III Championship, where they hope to show their true competitiveness.