

Faith, perseverance helped make McFarland runners into winners

By Ricardo
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The real Jim White, subject of the Disney movie, "McFarland USA," and runners visit Northside Christian Church in Fresno. THEFRESNOBEE

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What does it take to win nine state high school cross country championships?

Fast legs, tough endurance and natural athletic ability help. But the secret, as has been documented on the big screen and in the Valley's backyard, is faith and perseverance.



For McFarland coach Jim White, whose championship-winning teams inspired the Disney film "McFarland, USA," that was it. He, along with four of his former athletes from the 1987 undefeated team the film focused on, told an overflow audience at Northside Christian Church in Fresno on Saturday how faith and guidance served as the nucleus for McFarland's dynasty.



The four former players — Danny, David and Domacio Diaz and Johnny Sameniego — were all portrayed in "McFarland, USA." On the big screen, they were kids who grew up with loving, yet tough, parents who stressed faith, family and education. Today, they are adults with families and careers.

Some things never change, though. They still address their beloved coach as Mr. White. They still have a strong relationship with the man they said would lead them in prayer before meets and who'd sneak inspirational notes inside their notebooks that they'd open up during class.

"At that time, we didn't really understand his motivational speeches. He would always tell us, 'you could do more, you could do better,'" said David Diaz, who recalled a time when White surprised him with one of his notes. It read, "The answer to winning the meet next week is you."

White, who still owns a home in McFarland though he spends much time with his grandchildren in Texas, said the film accurately portrayed the spirit and character of his first team. He added he was humbled to be played by Kevin Costner and that he'd seen the movie 16 times while promoting it at several premieres.

"(The film is) not just about running," White said. "It's a true, true family movie that's about the hardships these boys here went through.

"It's a true story with a lot of Hollywood added to it," White said, referring to one of the film's comedic scenes in which White is seen riding a girl's "Barbie bike."

Danny Diaz, who referred to himself jokingly as the 1987 team's "seventh man," said talks about making a film about the team date back to 2001. Since then, the school has continued to excel in the sport, so much so that it was bumped up a division as part of the local high school sports governing body's competitive equity guidelines.

The three Diaz brothers and Sameniego still have their roots planted in the Valley. Danny Diaz counsels at-risk youth at McFarland High, Domacio Diaz is an officer in the Bakersfield Police Department, David Diaz works in the state

prison in Delano and Sameniego is a physical education teacher at a McFarland middle school — the same job White once held before he worked at the high school.

“He’s got some big shoes to fill,” Danny Diaz said, smiling.

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