

# Unhindered performance

## Blind sophomore athlete inspires with dedication

JORDAN DEMARIO | Staff Writer

As the gun goes off, the race for sophomore Morgan Vitou starts, her feet hit the ground of the track, her competitors racing beside her. Except she doesn't see the track in front of her, the person running beside her, or her teammates cheering her on.

But her blindness has not kept Vitou away from running.

"I love the feeling. I love the race feeling and the adrenaline rush. I love it so much and it's something I can do. I still have to run with someone but track is something that I actually feel like I can do," Vitou said.

After seventh grade, Vitou said she began to overthink everything and get in her own head about joining a track team in her condition. But she quickly steered back in the right direction and re-focused on the real reason she wanted to run track.

Vitou was born with a retinoblastoma, which is a type of eye cancer. At a young age, she was able to adapt from the effects of her cancer.

"I was born with a condition [that] my parents didn't know about until I was 7 months, so by the time they noticed, they had to get the proper diagnosis. Over the next 5 or so years, my vision would go in and out, then by 5 and a half, I lost it completely," Vitou said.

"I adapted so quickly that it was normal for me. So there wasn't anything physical that I couldn't really do would still do monkey bars and all that. For me I'd say it's more like the social aspect that was different."

Facing these challenges had a very big impact on Vitou as a person. She was able to learn how to emotionally and physically face challenges in her life in a positive way.

"[When I was young] some kids just wouldn't really talk to me which has definitely impacted me now, but I just kind of con-

vinced myself that I didn't really care. There are times where it still gets to me, because I still wish I could have that normal high school experience. I still wish I could go to prom and do all that. But I just don't really care about it anymore," Vitou said.

Track has been a way for Vitou to inspire others and show that despite not being able to see, she can still chase her dreams. Track head coach Kevin Shiver had the opportunity to work with Vitou, and even learn a few things from her.

"I don't work with her a lot... but I've seen a lot of growth just from outside looking in. [I've heard] great things about her and she's always got a great attitude," Shiver said.

Vitou has made an impact on the team by showing her perseverance towards her goals and how she strives to improve everyday.

"It's inspiring for our athletes to see somebody overcoming a disability such as hers and I think our athletes kind of see the effort she's putting towards each day of practice," Shiver said.

Vitou showed her dedication by showing up to daily track practices and Wednesday meets. Accomplishments like this does not only affect Vitou, but also others close to her.

"I've been doing this a long time and the first time I saw her run, I got a little emotional. As a coach, certain moments stand out in your mind throughout the years and this will be one that will stick with me for a long time," Shiver said.

Throughout her track journey, Vitou has gotten the team experience while running track. Her teammates and coaches are supportive throughout the whole process.

"There are certain things that are a struggle with a program our size. We have over 175 athletes on the track at one time sometimes, so it's very important that she stays safe," Shiver said.

"Her teammates have stepped up to help her out. Each practice a different athlete kind of steps up and helps her out through the workout process."

Another person that has gotten to support Vitou through her track journey is coach Arriyanna Whitaker. Whitaker is primarily a

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**Morgan Vitou**



Sophomore Morgan Vitou races down the track with senior Nicholas Coakley as her guide. "The challenges I have overcome are learning to adapt to a situation that may not fit every view I have. I've always had pressure from other people to be better and be at the top of everything because if I'm not I'm seen as just incapable of doing so. I have learned that I have to not push myself in some situations, especially a physical sport." *photo // Ava Murphy*

junior varsity sprinting coach, which is the event that Vitou runs, which allowed the two of them to build a bond.

"It feels really good and I'm happy to be able to work with her and just see her push herself into something that's a lot different because you have kids here who aren't limited by any physical things and they're just not willing to go outside of their comfort zone do things like track and she does anyway," Whitaker said.

Prior to starting track, Vitou was a student in Whitaker's class. Seeing Vitou on the track rather than in a classroom is a very different experience for Whitaker, who notices

just how far Vitou pushes herself.

"I love seeing her in that different setting than just being in a classroom and she's a lot more vocal about her wants and needs. It's brought her out of her shell a lot more and is a totally different light to see her as an athlete," Whitaker said.

Shiver expresses how lucky they are to have Vitou and that she is a great aspect to the team.

"We're happy to have Morgan and I think it's an inspiring, and uplifting event not just for Wando track and field but Wando High School in general," Shiver said.

*design // Julia Gaglione*