

Wrapping up the Summer Nights Track and Field Series for 2011, Lincoln High School played host to a meet that saw prior Series champions return to victory lane, newcomers make a substantial, albeit late, mark on the Series, and a cluster of age-group battles for the aggregate points crown come down to the wire. Under the setting sun and blustery winds, the meet featured fast times and strong marks, from the teenage ranks to the upper echelons of Masters competition.

In perhaps the most dramatic victory of the night, first-time Series competitor, former All-American at the University of Illinois, and Olympic hopeful, Babatunde Ridley, stormed through the Men's 200m in 21.52 seconds, winning handily while visibly shutting down for his last few strides. In the Women's 200m, Mishe Scott, the 2011 CIF San Diego Champion in the Long Jump and just a rising senior at El Camino High School in Oceanside, held off her closest foe, fourteen year old Sasha Stevens, running 25.93 to Stevens' 26.11.

In the full lap event, making a clean sweep of the four Summer meets, Daniel Thomas dipped under the 49 second barrier, winning by almost two full seconds in a time of 48.93. Using the Summer Nights Series as a competitive springboard for qualifying for this Fall's Pan American Games in Guadalajara, Mexico, Thomas gave glimpses of great things to come. Though several decades Thomas' senior, a number of Masters competitors showed talent and tenacity of their own, as Karl Smith took the Masters Men's title in 59.34 and Celestine Arambulo, a perfect 4-for-4 like Thomas, ran a scorching 1:04.28 to take the Masters Women's title. Through persistence, grit, and an uncanny sense of humor, Eric Jones, at age 68, took the Season Points title in the Masters Men's 400m, closing in style, with a 1:10.58. Not to be overlooked amidst the heavy hitters in the one lap event, Anna Lee McGregor took the Women's title in 1:01.72. Of note, one of the Series' youngest competitors, nine year old Sonata Simonaitis-Boyd battled debilitating muscle cramps on the final turn in her heat of the Women's 400m (falling to one knee in fact), but regained composure and grinded her way down the final straightaway for a heartening finish that typified the spirit of self-reliance at the very heart of track and field competition.

In the mid-distances, scoring his 3rd victory in 4 chances during the course of the Series, David Edwards – who incidentally owns a lifetime best of 4:03.20 in the Mile – ran away from the field to the tune of a 3:50.41 in the Men's 1500m. Leading the way for the women, Morgan Sjogren nearly achieved a sub-5 minute converted mile, crossing the line in 4:47.11. On the Masters level, Tim Gore continued his dominance, winning both this meet and the Season Points title in 4:12.26. That same Celestine Arambulo, prior to her winning efforts in the 400m, actually won the 1500m as well, crossing the line in 5:01.85.

In the pure distances, newcomer Alex Phipps took the 3000m in 9:06.99. Close behind Phipps, and "fresh" off a 1500m title, Tim Gore returned to capture the Masters Men's 3K crown in 9:17.14. On the women's side, former Clairemont High School and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo standout, Bridie McCarey, led the way in 10:09.85.

In the field events, Mike Rainis dominated the throws, nearly reaching 50 feet en route to the Men's Shot Put title. Among his closest competitors, and also the Series Points champion in the Masters

Shot Put, was Michael Estrada, who threw 33' 9 ½," outdistancing his teenage daughter, Leslie Estrada, who heaved her shot put 24' 4 ½." Yet, for all the talent in her bloodlines, the younger Estrada had no answer for the 33' 3" effort by Brown University alumna, Chelsea McCarron, who took gold in the women's event.

In the jumps, the precocious Mishe Scott struck again in the Women's Long Jump, nearly eclipsing the 18' 11 ¾" she leapt to win the San Diego Section Championships this past May. In the vertical leaps, after a spirited battle that almost outlasted the lights at Lincoln High School, Steven Silber crested 6'2," narrowly outdoing Rancho Bernardo High School junior, Jake Pavlovics, who, despite his second place showing on this evening, actually captured the Series Points title for the Men's High Jump. On the women's side, bowing out not long before her male compatriots, Inika McPherson soared to a 5'8" clearance, good for an easy first place finish in the Women's High Jump.

Bridging the divide between track and field, one competitor at this year's Summer Nights Series stood out beyond all others. A junior at Concordia College, and a sub-48 second 400m runner, Edgar Vazquez, all five feet, seven inches of him, actually placed in the Top 3 in Series Points in four distinct disciplines. The runaway leader in the Hurdles, Vazquez also added a podium finish in the Long Sprints (i.e., 400m), Sprints (i.e., 100-200m), and the Long Jump. What's even more astounding, he finished just outside the Top 3 in a fifth event, the High Jump (where he finished 4th overall).

On this Summer Night in late July, San Diego's best amalgam of would-be Olympians, current CIF Champions, future prep stars, and world-class Masters talent – who doggedly set out to prove there is no end to their tether – put on a multi-faceted display of running, leaping, and throwing. More than that, their efforts were an unadulterated manifestation of the rewards of dedicated training and conditioning cycles, effective (self-) coaching, and a self-motivation unique to the competitors of the track and field oval and environs. Most of the competitors on this night will never have sponsors, will never be able to earn a living based on their running pathos, and may never be televised in their efforts to chase down their personal records and personal athletic dreams. But, make no mistake, the approximately 300 distinct athletes who showed up at this year's Summer Nights Series are competitors in the truest sense. They compete when the rewards are largely internal and decidedly under-publicized. They train to dizzying thresholds, even if no one else is there to witness it. They meticulously shape their lives to accommodate their physiological goals, and methodically pursue these goals with a surgeon's precision, a warrior's heart, and a child's innocence. They are this year's participants in the Summer Nights Series in San Diego.

From Colin Donnelly