COVER STORY

Photo by The Magnificent Eye

Todd is the only black woman serving as commissioner for one of the NCAA's major athletic conferences.

Track coach becomes sports commissioner

They say that true courage is measured by a willingness sacrifice all that you are for what you can become. Dee Todd, the Atlantic Coast Conference Women's Track Coach of the Year in 1987, recently was faced with the option of leaving behind an extremely successful coaching career to venture into unexplored territory as an athletic administrator. She chose the latter opportunity, a road less travelled by women in sports. She plans to make a difference.

The former women's track and cross country coach at Georgia Tech was recently appointed assistant commissioner for the ACC. Todd supervises more than 20 women's conference championships and oversees the officiating for women's basketball. She also will recruit new officials and critique the league's current officials.

With her appointment to the assistant commissioner's post in one of the NCAA's major conferences, Todd joins a select corps of women across the country who are either commissioners or assistant commissioners. The Winston-Salem State graduate is the first and only black woman to occupy such a position. "I thought of this as an opportunity with great timing because now I'm on a pioneer level," she said.

Although thrilled at the notion of pioneering in relatively uncharted territory , Todd wants it known that she is a pioneer not restricted by labels. She won't allow herself to be content to rest her laurels at the base of someone else's pedestal.

"My goal is not to be as good as my three white counterparts but to be better," Todd said. "A year from now, I want people saying, 'Dee Todd, the assistant commissioner,' not 'Dee Todd, the black assistant commissioner.' I want to be able to do a job."

But she does realize that she has an opportunity to be a role model and an example for those who come behind her. That, she said, is a rare privilege.

"I look at it from the standpoint that being the first black is an opportunity to show black people and particularly black women that you can succeed, that you can go to an all-black school and advance," said Todd. "Hopefully, they'll see that you can take the things you've learned and apply them in the world and make it. I hope this will open opportunities for more and more blacks to find that out."

Certainly Todd's past endeavors bear testament to the fact that she is capable of handling any number of tasks. She enjoyed highly successful stints as track coach at Northwestern University and Georgia Tech. She has been on the other side as a track athlete, garnering several high school titles in New Jersey. For two years, Todd plied her talents on the Roller Derby circuit as a member of the Philadelphia Pioneers. Additionally, her face has adorned Kellogg Corn Flake boxes, Fashion Fair makeup products and McDonalds ads, the results of her experiences as a model.

So why leave opportunities of several lifetimes that the average person can only dream about? There are several reasons, but none more important than the simplest one. Dee Todd steps to her own beat and does what works best for her and not someone else.

Hundreds of young models across the country suffer and sacrifice everything just to come close to the kinds of breaks that she has had. Todd, however, considered modeling *one* life opportunity -- not *the* life opportunity.

"To me, even when I did it, it was not something that I wanted to make my life's career," said Todd, a smile crossing the face that brought her to the attention of several companies in the late 1970s. "Each day you wake up a year older. It was nice but it was so superficial. I didn't like feeling that I always had to be on or look a certain way. I just didn't like the superficial kinds of things that went along with it and sports was always my first love anyway."

Leaving behind unmeasured potential as a track coach and the lure of a glamourous life as a model, Todd chose a new challenge, one that places her in a pivotal post in one of the NCAA's upper echelon athletic conferences.

"I'm 40 years old and I had to think, 'Do I want to be on the field coaching at 45? At 50?," said Todd, an 18-year veteran coach. "I knew I wanted to stay in athletics because that's been my life. I always thought I might like to be a conference director or an athletic director. Now, I'm an assistant commissioner of a championship conference. I'm right in the thick of things."

Being "right in the thick of things" is keeping Todd busy. Her appointment book is filled with dates of various championships she is to attend, press interviews and the dates of special happenings in the life of her 10-year-old son, Stuart.

A single mother, Todd said that despite the time demands on a coach's life, she has managed to be there when her son has really needed her. While she was coaching at Georgia Tech, , she had a live-in babysitter who cared for her son until she was home again. But she said "being there" for her son played had a definite impact on her decision to accept the position with the ACC.

On this particular day, "being there" involves a phone call from Stuart, who is anxious to relate the incidents of his day at school. Putting other things on hold, Todd turns an attentive ear to her son and inquires about an upcoming test at school.

"He's at the age now when I feel he really needs me," said Todd. "When I was considering taking this job, I certainly had to consider that it would allow me more time to be there for him. I've watched him grow and I'm involved in what he's doing. I think that in this stretch of his life he really needs me and he will need me more than ever."

Coaching was deeply imbedded in Todd's blood. It was not easy for her to walk away from her team. She said she considered all the things a coach would wonder about, such as what kind of season was coming up, how the recruits would develop and whether she would miss the excitement of meet time.

"When I found out about this opportunity I felt it was the chance of a lifetime," Todd said. "But it always comes at time when you feel you have your best line up ever and you think you have your best recruits ever. I had to ask myself, 'Would I want to leave them?' But then would I want to turn down the opportunity of a lifetime?"

For Todd the dilemma would come down to a choice of trading a proven great situation for a potentially great situation, at the least an enviable position. But there have been glitches in Todd's storybook roster of opportunities. By her own admission, there were "a lot of valleys" -- times when she said she never would have dared dream she'd be where she is today.

After spending years shuffling in and out of foster homes in Philadelphia and Washington, a 10-year-old Todd was shipped off to live with her aunt in a middle-class section of Camden, N.J.

It was during that time, under the tutelage of her aunt, Thelma Marshall, that Todd's true life potential began to blossom. In 1965 and 1966, she discovered track and was good enough to record state high school titles in the 220-yard dash and the long jump.

Two years after her high school graduation, it was on to WSSU where Todd participated in intramurals and secured a four-year post as head cheerleader. She attended dance classes at the North Carolina School of the Arts and graduated from WSSU magna cum laude with a physical education major and a biology minor. The rest, as they say, is history.

"If you had asked me when I was 10 years old if I would ever be a track coach or an assistant commissioner or do any of the other things I've done, I would have said no," Todd said. "That came from having so many downs. Sometimes you can get stuck in the mud. But when you get out of the mud, there's always a hole in front of you. If you can get out of the mud and steer clear of it, you won't stay in the mud. What I've been able to do is a gift from God. I sometimes feel I'm one of the chosen. That's something that guides me because I just feel that somebody somewhere is watching over me. That's just what it has to be. I've been quite lucky in life to have done things people dream of."

One of Todd's admirers is not the least bit surprised that his pupil has accomplished what she has. He said he knew from the time that she was at Winston-Salem State that she would do whatever she set her mind to do.

"She had direction and knew what she wanted," said Clarence "Big House" Gaines, one of Todd's instructors at the university. "She was aggressive and very resourceful. She also was probably the prettiest gal there."

Todd has acquired a reputation of being a tough, no-nonsense kind of a track coach, capable of inspiring her athletes to produce their very best. But her well-tailored, sharply manicured physical appearance seems a contradiction to the image of a traditional nose-to-the grindstone track coach. Her fashionable dress and "career woman" appearance are testament to the fact that she settles for nothing less than her personal best.

"I put pressure on myself. I've never been in a situation where people demanded that I succeed," she said emphatically. "I want to be the best. I don't like to lose."

Todd feels that it is "something inside of me" that has allowed her to succeed and to meet and rise above adversity. And it appears to just keep getting better. Recently a network television crew interviewed Todd for a made-for-television movie which will chronicle her life. But even that experience, which she mentions matter-of-factly, is not likely to change who or what Dee Todd is.

"You have to keep life in the proper perspective," she said. "You have to have a burning desire to win. You can't go out ready to lose. I know that there are some people who may say 'I bet she got that job because she's black.' That may or may not be true, but I put pressure on myself to prove them wrong. I believe that people can succeed as long as they think they can. I'm fortunate that my life has followed a nice little pattern."

-Robin Barksdale

Photo by The Magnificent Eye

A commissioner's schedule is a very hectic one. But like other working women, Todd has learned how to balance career and motherhood. Dee and 10-year-old son Stuart await the start of long-distance races at the ACC Cross Country Championships.