

Annual youth track program kicks off tonight

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FITCHBURG -- With the program well past the decade mark in existence, some of the earliest participants in the Greater Fitchburg Track and Field Club (GFTFC) are enjoying their summer break from college. But as it has since its inception, the club strives to offer some summer fun while getting a new crop of kids active.

GFTFC is a free summer track program open to youth from Fitchburg and the surrounding communities. Open to both kids and teenagers, the 2017 campaign begins tonight.

"Our mission statement is simple; to encourage running in and around Fitchburg," GFTFC administrator Chris Woods said. "It's really all about promoting a healthy lifestyle for our kids. We teach kids skills that they can use for other sports, and for our older kids it reinforces those skills and techniques. It's really a win-win for everybody involved."

The program runs every Tuesday and Thursday from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Registration and gates open about a half hour before the start of the workouts.

Since there is no monetary commitment involved, there is no pressure for kids to attend week in and week out. If there are other commitments on a certain night, parents do not need to inform GFTFC staff about it, but instead just come to the next session that they are available for. Even if athletes only do it one time and decide it is not for them, instructors don't mind.

"There's no pressure," Woods said. "You can sign up any night you're available. We know it's summer and people are on vacation, but the focus is on coming to have fun and coming when you can. We hope they enjoy it."

The program structure boasts nine practice and skill-building sessions, with the 10th session featuring an organized track meet. The track meet will take place Aug. 8, with Aug. 10 serving as a rain date. For any inclement weather, whether it is rain, thunderstorms, or excessive heat, parents can check the organization's Facebook page or group for up-to-the-minute updates.

"The track meet will give the kids a chance to demonstrate their skill in the events, but still focuses on a non-competitive atmosphere," Woods said. "We give the kids awards in the end."

Staff involved in coaching includes Fitchburg coaches Cindy Donelan, Mark Jackson and Sara Lamey and Leominster coach Kathy Harris.

The GFTFC is a USA Track and Field sanctioned club, which opens opportunities for athletes to compete in USA Track and Field events. Recently about a half-dozen athletes from the club competed in the Junior Olympics at Fitchburg State University, with some moving on to the regional championships this month.

The club features several groups of students broken down by age. There is at least one certified track coach and multiple high school volunteers per group for instruction and supervision. There is modified

equipment for the youngest competitors, including modified javelins, soft shot puts and low hurdles. Other events include sprinting, distance-oriented drills, high jump and long jump.

A typical session starts with stretching and warm-up fundamentals, before breaking into running workouts. The later portion of the day features learning the assortment of field events and honing in on skills.

For those students in the Pre-K age level, parents are welcome to take an active role in helping to get youngsters acclimated. Some parents do the workouts alongside their children, while others play more of a passive role depending on the comfort level of their children.

"Mark Jackson always makes it clear to the parents that we appreciate their support with their children, especially the young kids," Woods said. "We don't hesitate to ask them to come down from the stands if there is a problem or one is struggling and a lot of parents are walking the track and getting some exercise themselves while their kids participate."

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