

There was a time when Isabelle Woody didn't run on her own.

She was carried.

Over a decade ago, Isabelle was small enough to be hoisted onto her father's shoulders during victory laps at the Drake Relays meet, waving to fans as he circled the track at Drake Stadium in Des Moines, Iowa.

It was a tradition that Isabelle relished in, alongside her brother, Drake, who was named after the relays. Now as a collegiate athlete, she returns to the same stadium, no longer being carried, but running herself.

Track and field, for the Woody family, was never just a sport. It was the center of their household.

Joey Woody, a former professional 400-meter Division I hurdler at Northern Iowa and current head coach of the University of Iowa team, started a youth track club with his wife, Heather, when Isabelle was six. The idea was to let their kids try it, no pressure attached.

"I would say Isabelle was all about it, she just loved to run," Joey said.

Her early curiosity soon turned into something more. At a meet, Isabelle's eyes wandered to the high jump area and she was determined to try it, despite the fact that she had no idea how.

She told her mother that she was going to learn how to do it, and she did, winning her age group.

By nine, Isabelle was winning national championships.

Growing up, track was a part of her everyday life. However, it was still a complex journey. As she got older, the sport she grew up with became something more personal, and more complicated, especially when it came to her father.

After spending her first year in college at UC Santa Barbara, Isabelle transferred back home to Iowa to run for her father. From an outside perspective, the relationship between her and Joey looked like a flawless blend of coaching and parenting, according to her brother.

However, Joey was quick to separate those roles.

"I told her, 'You need to call me Coach Woody,'" Joey said.

Joey's coaching philosophy is simple: treat every athlete the same, whether they're a top scorer or consistently in last. His daughter was no exception.

“If you’re going to be here and you’re going to work your tail off, then I’m going to do the same for you,” Joey said.

Outside of coaching, he often reflects on what track taught him long before he even had children. He describes it as a sport of extremes, and one that demands emotional control.

“There’s no real failures in track and field,” Joey said. “It’s how you approach it, you have to learn from it.”

This mindset shaped the way he raised his kids. Still, Isabelle’s journey was not easy. One of the defining moments of her athletic career came when she suffered from a long mental block in the high jump, the event that had first drawn her into the sport.

“That took a toll on me, for sure,” she said.

That changed only after an injury forced her back into it. In her senior year of high school, she broke her non-jumping foot, which limited her options in the events she could participate in. When she consulted doctors, asking what she could still do, the answer was the high jump.

Isabelle hesitated at the thought of competing in the event again, but she decided that it was something she needed to do. That season, she competed through the pain and went undefeated in regular meets. She went on to win the conference and finish fourth at state.

“It just re-instilled my love for track and field,” she said.

One of the most meaningful moments between Isabelle and her father came during her freshman year at a state-qualifying meet at Joey’s alma mater, City High. He arrived late, but just in time for her race in the 400 meter hurdles.

She didn’t know he was there until she heard him.

“I could hear him yelling my steps, ‘attack, attack,’” she said. “I knew exactly where he was standing.”

Isabelle ran a personal best, shaving nearly four seconds off her time and qualifying for state against all expectations. For her, it wasn’t just a race. It was a full-circle moment. Joey had specialized in that exact event, and that track was where he had built his legacy as a Hall of Famer.

Hearing his voice guide her through the making of her own legacy was the cherry on top.

Today, Isabelle is still trying to find her way. She has moved through different events, explored new roles in track and field, and even spent time away from her father’s program before

eventually returning home. That decision, Joey says, meant a lot. Not because it brought her back, but because it was her choice.

“I am thankful she had that opportunity to go somewhere else and experience something new and different,” he said. “But, it definitely made me feel good that she wanted to be coached by me and be in our team and program.”

Track and field is still a strong tie in their relationship, but it is no longer just a sport that Joey introduced to his daughter.

It is a space in which Isabelle learned to grow. Sometimes under his coaching, sometimes away from it, but always within reach of the same person that once carried her around the track all those years ago.