

# Running with MacCanDo

**First nonprofit track team in the Tenderloin**  
*'It's about self-confidence and education, too'*

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**Above:** Boeddeker Park Recreation Director Robert McDaniels starts the Christian Academy's determined speedsters (from left) Leitzel Martinez, Stephanie Miramontes and Rosa Valencia in the 40-yard dash up the middle of the park.

**Top far right:** Miramontes and Valencia are nearly neck-and-neck in the home stretch.

**Bottom far right:** The Christian Academy's Francisco Heredia executes a tuck style broad jump in fine form. Some kids jumped 5-plus feet.

**Center:** Leitzel Martinez tries to achieve a distance mark in the long jump, the afternoon's last exercise.

EVERY Wednesday after school, up to 30 boys and girls pile into Boeddeker Park, hooting and hollering as they race up and down. In any other neighborhood, this would be business as usual, but in the gritty Tenderloin, it's a cause for celebration.

The kids are members of the MacCanDo Tenderloin Youth Track Club, a dream team assembled by the park's recreation director Robert McDaniels, who also hosts a monthly track meet for kids 5 to 12 from the Christian Academy across the street at 230 Jones.

McDaniels had the idea for the club 14 years ago — a time when Boeddeker Park was so populated with drunks and dope dealers that when he first invited Tenderloin kids to visit the park and run track, they couldn't.

"The park was packed with drug dealers so we ran around and around the whole block," says McDaniels, 48, then a new Rec and Park employee and former star high hurdler at San Francisco State. Running were more than a dozen kids, a mix of Filipinos, Spanish, Asian, black and white kids he called his "rainbow" team.

"It was hard times, and there was some negativity, people on the sidelines saying a track team could never happen."

But it did. McDaniels followed his bliss and persisted with the young ones — the teenagers were involved then in a basketball program. Slowly the city began focusing on the park's problems, and in the mid-1990s police were assigned there four hours a day.

"The drunks and dealers wouldn't come in then," McDaniels says, "so I brought the kids in and they've stayed."

From those originals has sprung the track club, which also practices Saturdays at Kezar Stadium — on a real track — and competes in Los Gatos, San Jose and Berkeley.

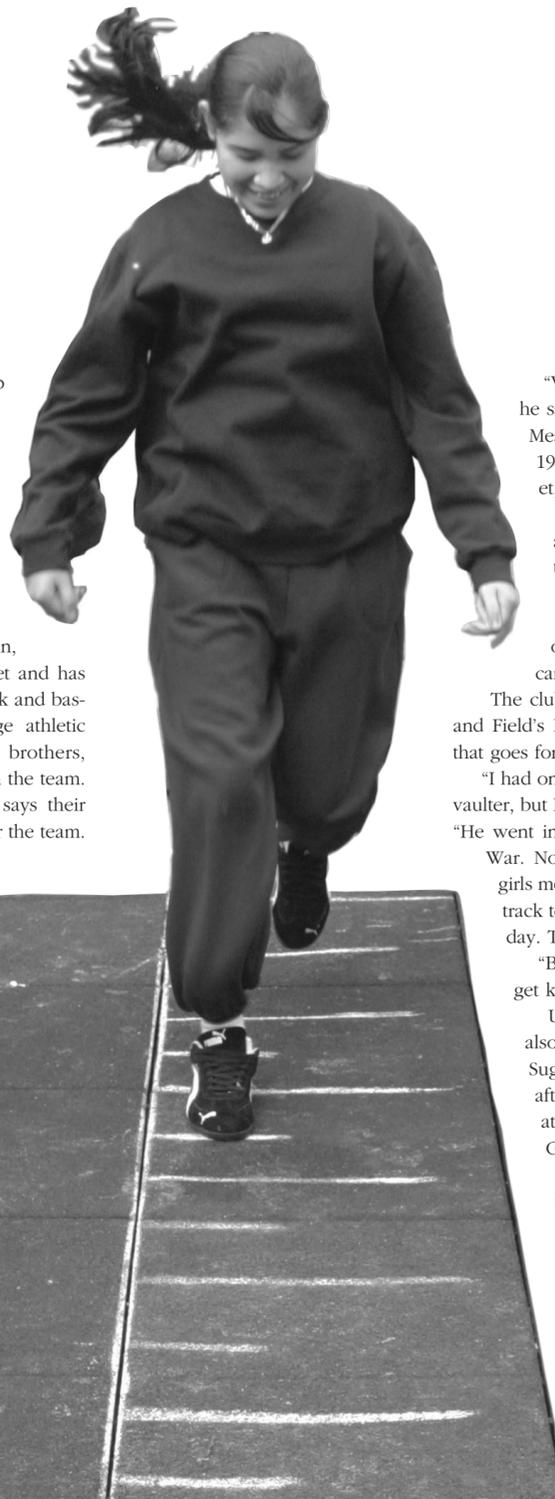
In November, at the monthly track meet for Christian Academy kids, the 6-foot-6 McDaniels lined

up 64 of them to race by threes, 40 yards up the wide brick walkway's chalked lanes. A piercing blast from his coach's whistle set them off, ponytails flying and arms pumping, their classmates yelling and squealing encouragement. The meet concluded with the long jump competition on the playground.

From this group, McDaniels says he's recruited eight for his team. The rest come from the neighborhood, including the captain, Jamilia Cato, 13, who lives across the street and has been a member seven years. A talented track and basketball player, she's headed for a college athletic scholarship, McDaniels believes. Her brothers, Anthony, 11, and Demarcus, 15, also are on the team.

"The team is everything to my kids," says their mother, Baretta Cato. "They try to recruit for the team. And Jamilia, she's going to take this all the way to the top, honey."

The backbone of the team is Yuko, McDaniels' wife, who helped guide it to nonprofit status last year and its first budget, he said.



"We went to about 10 years of seminars," he said, shaking his head at the effort it took. Meanwhile, keeping the team active since 1992 has cost him about \$5,000 out of pocket, he estimates.

But his fund-raising has turned things around. The team's first grant came from the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center at 318 Leavenworth, followed by others from Variety-The Children's Charity of New York, Wells Fargo, 2003 mayoral candidate Mike Denny and the Hilton Hotel.

The club, a registered member of the USA Track and Field's Pacific Association, has a \$51,000 budget that goes for travel, food and uniforms.

"I had one kid who graduated from Lowell, a pole-vaulter, but I'm no good with names," McDaniels said. "He went into the Marines and was in the first Gulf War. Now he's back and in school. One of my girls moved to San Jose and is on the high school track team. She called and thanked me the other day. That was nice."

"But anyone can be on my team. This is to get kids involved and off the street."

Under McDaniels' supervision, Boeddeker also hosts the track event of the five-day Sgt. Sugrue Tenderloin Games in August, named after TL cop Ken Sugrue who died of a heart attack three years after he started the Games in 1995.

McDaniels has added something unique to the Tenderloin, says Dan Yee, Children's Playground director who serves on the track club's board.

"Robert has created the first nonprofit track team in the Tenderloin," he says. "He gets those kids involved in track and keeps them busy. But he incorporates more than track. It's about self-confidence and education, too. He told me once he kept kids from competing because their grades weren't good enough." ■

