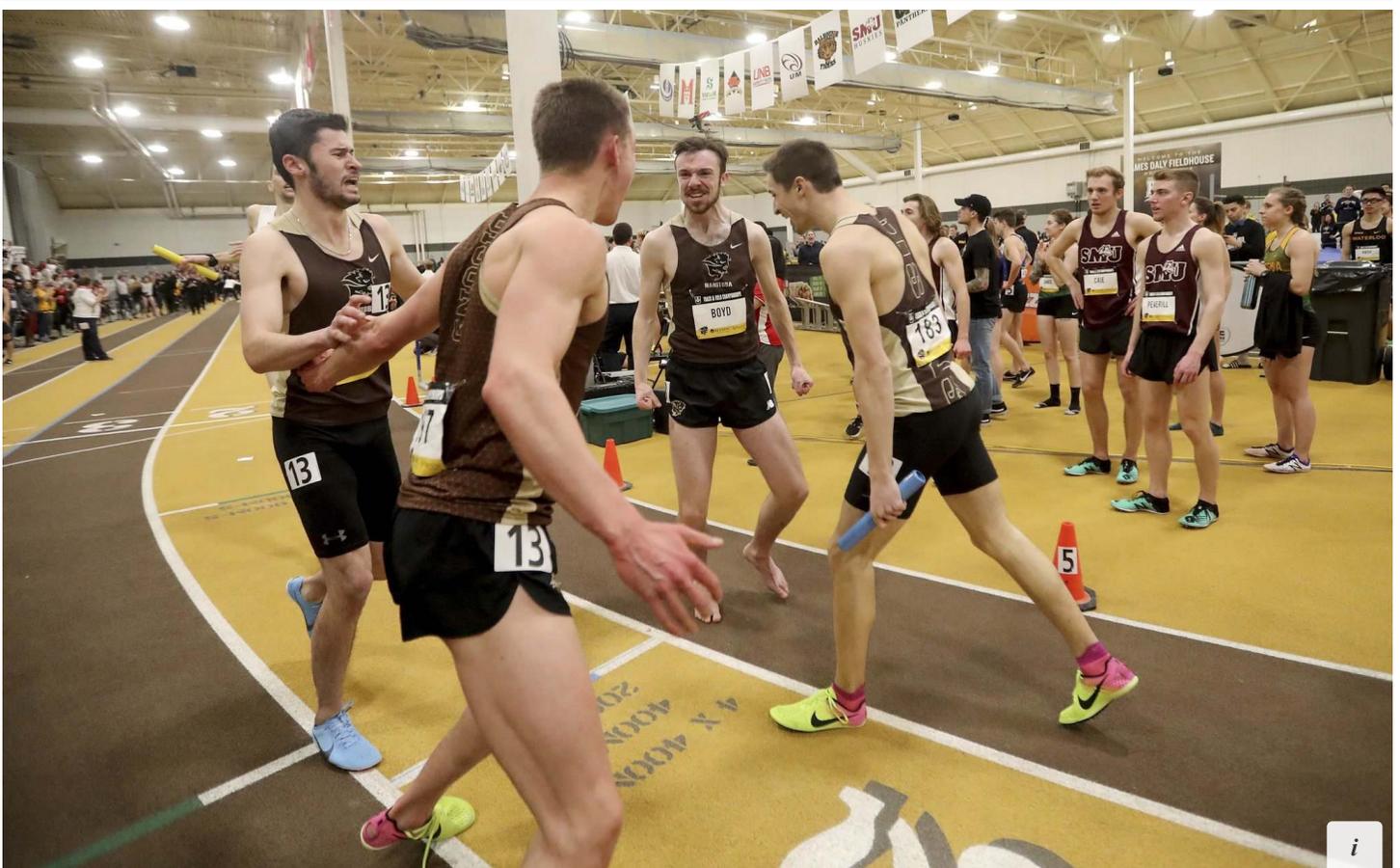


Herd jumps, runs to golds, silvers

BISONS GRAB FOUR PODIUM SPOTS -- TWO GOLD, TWO SILVER

By: Mike Sawatzky

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Alhaji Mansaray isn't a movie producer, but he couldn't have scripted a much better conclusion to Friday night's competition at the U Sports Indoor Track and Field Championships.

The 24-year-old Winnipegger, making his final appearance in the brown and gold, outduelled his Manitoba Bisons teammate Oyinko Akinola for the gold medal with an

overflow crowd urging him on during the men's high-jump competition at the Jim Daly Fieldhouse.

"I always have good jumps here," Mansaray said while soaking up the moment. "I always love competing at home. You can see my friends, family — they're all here cheering me on, so it brings the energy.

"I love big crowds. Whenever there's a big crowd, I can feed off it and jump well."

Akinola captured the silver while York's Pierce LePage, the Commonwealth Games silver medallist in the decathlon, went home with the bronze.

Mansaray, who returned to the Bisons last fall for his fifth year after a season away from the program, made the 2.15-metre height on his second try and took three valiant shots at a personal best of 2.25 before finally bowing out. Akinola cleared 2.12 (his personal best is 2:13) before missing three times at 2.15.

LePage, a superb all-round performer who won the 60-metre hurdles and earned long-jump gold earlier in the day, exited the competition after making the 2.09 height. Manitoba's Sidiki Sow placed fifth with a leap of 2.03.

All season, Mansaray has battled a painful knee injury, and was only recently able to regain his form.

"I've had a patellar tendonitis issue for the longest time," Mansaray said. "I still have it, but I found a way to maintain it. It hasn't gone away yet, but I'm working with a lot of people like Lori (Giasson), the athletic therapist for the Bisons. She's been trying new things and helping me maintain the pain. Because you can't completely get rid of it, but the best thing is to maintain it."

Mansaray established the U Sports record of 2.20 at the Canada West championships in 2017, and went on to earn gold at the nationals.

Akinola, 24, finished first in long jump, second in triple jump and fourth in high jump at the recent conference championship.

"It was fun, it was great," Akinola said. "Was it hard to lose? Yes, it's always hard to lose.

"This was the goal at the beginning of the season: to get at least two of us on the



podium. Today, coming in it wasn't something we were thinking about. It was just go out and really just have fun. Coach Ming (Pu Wu), he programs really well and this is the time he wants us to peak and we're doing exactly that."

The finale of Mansaray's university career doesn't mean the end of a career.

"I'm not going to quit," Mansaray said. "I've made three national teams. I want to continue this year and make FISU (Universiade) and then there's also Pan Am seniors. And then hopefully, I jumped the Olympic standard this year which is 2.30. That's my goal. I'm going to start looking for sponsors — whoever wants to sponsor me — and move on from there."

High-jump gold and silver wasn't the only big news for the Bisons.

Manitoba's Emily Blackner claimed silver in the women's pole vault, clearing 3.95, just behind Alberta's Kathryn Van Ryswyk, while the Bisons top-rated 4x800 men's relay squad surged to gold in a time of 7:37.29, just ahead of Guelph in 7:37.45.

Manitoba's team of Jack Taylor, Connor Boyd, Matt Van Schepdael and Simon Berube made good on their reputation, but only after Berube, running the anchor leg, appeared to lose ground to the Guelph anchor runner only a few strides from the finish. Berube looked back to his right while the competition closed on his left shoulder.

But Berube was monitoring it all with the help of a large video screen just beyond the finish line.

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"I saw him on the screen and thought, 'Please don't catch me,'" Berube said. "It's amazing, especially with so many fifth-years, it was so great to get a win in their last year."

Home-track advantage was a bonus for the Bisons.

"That meant everything to us," Van Schepdael said as he sat exhausted in the infield. "Even seeing former members of the team — that win's for them and for the program and to all the guys that came before us. Hopefully the guys are inspired to do it in the future."

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