

Boys cross country program building

By **BRUCE YENTES**
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MAHOMET — By focusing on his athletes “having fun,” Mahomet-Seymour High School Boys Cross Country head coach Neal Garrison has seen the number of his runners swell as the 2004 season gets underway in earnest this week.

Garrison, a guidance counselor at the school, is entering his third year at the helm of the cross country program and he’s seen the number of M-SHS participants increase by over three-fold since he took over the head coaching slot in 2002.

This year, most meets will see over 40 runners line up wearing the M-SHS colors, in stark contrast to the eight who participated in the sport the year prior to Garrison’s arrival.

Before now, it’s always been difficult attracting youngsters to compete in cross country. The sport of distance running is a grueling, solitary endeavor. It takes effort and time to build the endurance necessary to successfully compete in meets that cover a distance of three miles. Also, there’s little, if any, recog-

nition along the course on the way to the finish line. Hence, Garrison set out to make the practices as fun as possible while giving his athletes the opportunity to challenge themselves, as well as the competitors they’ll face from other schools.

“We’re trying to overcome the reputation of cross country itself; that everybody’s going out running ten miles a day,” he said. “We don’t do that. The way we set up practice, we give the athletes a lot of choice in what they do and how far they go. We encourage them to challenge themselves.”

Garrison has also instituted games into the practice schedule.

“We try to make running fun, as enjoyable as possible,” he said. “We do the traditional workouts, but we also try to do running games.”

For the team to enjoy itself while staying in shape for the meets, Garrison has his runners play flag football, soccer, “ultimate Frisbee” and relay games. They’ll also take part in scavenger hunts

around town and will soon take part in a food drive.

“We’ll divide it up in teams and whoever can bring back the largest amount of food will get some type of reward,” Garrison said, adding that the food will be donated to an area food pantry.

“The team tries to have a fun time,” Garrison said. “They work hard, but the main focus is to have fun first, with the competition second. As a result, the word spreads that it’s a fun time. We really try to make it not just a boring, grueling run.”

Seniors Patrick Kirwan and Kevin Koenig will serve as the team’s captains this fall and Garrison said he appreciates their effort in setting an example in the offseason.

“They worked extremely hard this summer,” he said. “Traditionally my runners will run up to 150 miles in the summer. They ran close to 500 miles. That’s 6-1/2 miles per day, seven days per week.”

Also heading the list of returnees who pounded a lot of pavement over the summer are sophomores Justin Sebens and Troy Pittman.

“They were pretty dedicated this summer and they helped to get others dedicated,” the coach said.

Garrison is counting on those four runners to consistently score points in meets this fall. Only the top five from each team score points in a meet, “but we look at it as kind of a domino effect,” Garrison said. “The number six runner is putting pressure at practice and meets on the number five runner and so forth on down. Everybody makes practice a lot more enjoyable and they’re definitely contributing to the team if they’re not in the top five.”

Because of the sheer numbers out for the sport this year, Garrison has a multitude of newcomers to cross country.

“It’s a fun group,” he said. “Athletically speaking, 90 percent of them are actually new to the sport and (the team’s) real inexperienced. It’s going to take them a good three weeks or more to see how they’ll develop and adjust to the three mile runs. They’re definitely hard workers and good kids, but three miles takes a lot of adjustment.”