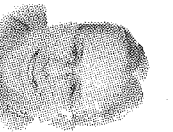


FRED KRONER: ON CROSS-COUNTRY

Strategy needed for state runs

Finalists want to be at their best, but methods differ on how to get there



The race will start, and the plan will seem simple.

Run fast and beat everybody to the finish line and become a state champion.

There are misguided perceptions about what it takes to run — and to

coach — cross-country at an elite level.

Saturday's season-ending high school meet is the state finals. Six races, representing three classes for boys and girls, will be held at Detweiler Park in East Peoria.

They will start an hour apart, beginning with the Class 1A girls at 9 a.m.

Some athletes will run faster than they ever have. Some will pretty much duplicate their times from other meets. Others will fall short of achieving their personal bests.

It's an unpredictable process.

"We have tried to make sure our runners are prepared both mentally and physically to do their best at state," Mahomet-Seymour boys' coach Neal Garrison said. "This isn't an easy task as the runners have invested so much time, energy and emotion into their training for months and years to get ready for their chance to race well at state."

Runners, like swimmers, try to taper for a particular meet. It's the time when they hope to be conditioned to do their best.

"Peaking and tapering are both a science and an art, and especially tricky," Monticello coach Dave Remmert said.

"The goal is to ensure that the teams arrive to the starting line confident and rested properly to ensure best performance."

"It isn't about the volume of miles run or training intensity any more because from a physiological standpoint, the gains one can make during the last week of training won't materialize in time for the state meet."

Some schools pick the sectional meet to hit their peak with the knowledge that if they don't run their best, they will not qualify for state.

Others who are more confident in their ability to advance plan their taper to take full effect on the day of state.

Danville coach Todd Orvis has had his squad on different training regimens.

"Most of the team started to taper their training at the beginning of last week," Orvis said. "Qualifying for state as a team wasn't a sure thing, so I wanted to make sure that the team (except senior Caleb Hummer) had fresh legs."

"We will continue to taper this week in hopes that they will drop more time."

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Continued from B-1

There is an unknown variable that can enter the equation. Some days, runners just aren't up to par regardless of the conditioning and training plan they have followed.

Unity boys' coach Dike Stirrett sensed that last week during the Class 1A sectional at the Hickory Point Golf Course near Decatur.

"In all honesty, we did not overlook sectional in any way," Stirrett said, "but we didn't perform up to our capabilities.

"I think some of the kids were a bit disappointed with their performance, which may set us up well for this Saturday. I say that because they don't usually perform subpar two weeks in a row, so there is certainly hope, and we do have high expectations."

Unity is not the only area boys' team with lofty goals entering the state meet. Monticello is coming off team titles in the regional and sectional.

Individually, Oakwood/Armstrong-Potomac's Jon Davis is the defending state champion and Tuscola's Eric Ponder is regarded as one of his top challengers.

In Class 2A, Mahomet-Seymour has had a dominant season, winning team titles in seven of the eight meets in which it has entered, led by junior Alex Keeble, who could be in contention for individual honors.

There is not an exact science or a foolproof formula that is guaranteed to always work.

"Peaking at the right time is one of the huge keys to success in this sport," St. Joseph-Ogden coach Jason Retz said.

"We push a fine line between elite and injured all the time.

"The closer you get to that line, the more successful you can be, but it's a fine line.

"At the same time, when you taper, you have to decide what is enough and what is too little."

Monticello's Remmert has thoroughly studied the do's and don'ts of the sport.

"Research will tell you that there are three major physiological adaptations that must occur that define 70 percent of running performance," Remmert said. "Improvements in VO2 max (the maximum volume of oxygen that an athlete can use), lactate threshold (the exercise intensity at which lactate, more specifically, lactic acid starts to accumulate in the bloodstream), and running economy (the energy demand for a given velocity of submaximal running)."

What does it all mean?

"At its core, it's about the heart as a pump and how to maximize the efficiency of that pump to ensure that the muscles receive the oxygen they need to function effectively under increased intensity during exercise," Remmert said. "It's about which workouts train these components and at which time they should be executed during the season and at what intensity.

"It has become very complicated. It is about how to train an athlete properly to improve the function of each of these physiological processes."

Keep in mind, this week's competitors in the IHSA finals are all teenagers. Many have become

creatures of habit. They want to continue running in the days leading up to state.

"In some kids," Remmert said, "if they back off their work exponentially during the last week, they feel like they are losing fitness, when really they aren't."

Feeling ready mentally can promote a sense of confidence.

"You can't back off (the training) too much," Retz said. "If you do, the kids, from trial and error, seem flat."

It's important, Stirrett believes, to attempt to keep extraneous pressure off the runners.

"We are certainly taking that approach this week," he said. "Just go and run the best race you can and let everything else take care of itself."

Remmert has seen how disastrous it can be when stress reaches a boiling point.

"There is a lot of pressure heading into the state meet," he said, "and I've seen kids make themselves sick simply over the stress of it."

In about 15 minutes per race for the boys, and about 17 minutes per race for the girls, winners will be determined Saturday. For all of the planning and preparation, one point cannot be overlooked.

"We know we have to give a great effort for those 15 minutes and can't rest on our past," Garrison said. "We know our past doesn't determine our future."

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