

Jack Aho leads Grayslake Central to 2A Boys championship

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Peoria, Ill --- When Jack Battaglia crossed the line in 26th place as Grayslake Central's 5th man, the celebration began on the south end of Detweiller Park. Call it a mix between Mardi Gras and New Year's Eve and Christmas Day. Put it all together and you saw the jubilation in the eyes of the Grayslake Central runners and supporters.

Their boys' team won the first state championship in the school's history as they ran away from the field with 4 all-state runners and a 54 point total.

"Our guys ran absolutely fantastic especially our top 5," said Grayslake Central Coach Jimmy Centella. "All of our guys were 100% ready to go on Saturday with the exception of Danny Vincent who I would say was still only about 90% after battling illness throughout the middle of season. Danny still ran a very tough and strong race considering his circumstances. We hadn't had a chance to run on a flat course in good conditions since First to the finish, and we projected our guys to be ready to runs some big PRs at state. And that is exactly what happened today."

All eyes would be on Jack Aho in the individual race just like every other race this season. The junior did go out too hard in the beginning letting Alex Keeble (Mahomet-Seymour HS) push the pace early on. Keeble went through the 800 in 2:13 opening up a gap of three seconds on the rest of the pack. By the time that the race got to the mile, the pack had swallowed Keeble up. Aho had taken the lead as the





pack of Charlie Nodus (Hinsdale South HS, Darien), Filip Pajak (Prairie Ridge HS, Crystal Lake), Jack Franklin (Normal University HS), and Shane Williamson (Vernon Hills HS) was right him. The group passed by in 4:42 with another group led by Keeble and Roman Drabchuk (Hinsdale South, Darien) two seconds behind.

The race began coming out of the triangle when Drabchuk, Nodus, and Aho began to separate themselves from the group. The three runners went past the 2 miles in 9:38. Pajak, Franklin, and Luke Beattie (Woodstock HS) were chasing after them two seconds back. The lead trio made the turn behind the finish line and starting to increase their pace. It seemed unfair that Hinsdale South teammates Nodus and Drabchuk were running in tandem. It did not bother Aho.

Just before 800 meters to go, Aho made his move starting to move away from Nodus. Drabchuk was starting to drop off the pace. Nodus was still within grasp of Aho as they made the jig jog to the final 300 meters. That is when Aho took off. The lead increased with 200 to go, with 100 to go. He looked back with 50 meters to go. A smile came over his face as he approached the finish line in 14:25. The state championship was his.

"The pace felt pretty tough in the first mile. In the triangle I made my surge just a little bit and took the lead. Roman and Charlie pushed me the whole way. I made my move along Route 29. I knew they would come back and made another surge. It paid off in the end," Jack Aho said. "My legs were dead in the end. It was surreal. I can't put it into words. When I finished and then saw all my teammates at the end, it was icing on the cake."

Nodus was five seconds back in 14:30. His teammate Drabchuk was another five seconds back placing third. Pajak was also under 14:40 as he placed fourth in 14:39.

The Grayslake Central pack started to come in. Jack Aho's twin brother Matt also finished in the top ten placing 7th. Then Central's 3-4-5 runners came in within a second of each other as John Girmscheid finished 23rd, Eli Minsky finished 25th, and Battaglia in 26th.

"Going in to the race were confident that our guys were ready to run their best and give Mahomet-Seymour our best shot. Mahomet had been putting up fast times and tight splits all year so we were definitely ready for a big time battle," Centella said. "As the race unfolded, it started out pretty tight team wise, but our guys continued to move up and as they moved along it looked like we were pulling away. When I saw our top 5 go by at about the 1000 meter to go mark, I knew we had the race in our hands. As I sprinted back to the coaches' bleacher by the finish line, I couldn't help but start to feel the emotion of it all and I started to get a bit choked up."

The top ranked team all season was Mahomet-Seymour. The Bulldogs ran a good race but Grayslake Central just ran better. Andrew Walmer (10th) and Alex Keeble (16th) led the Bulldogs to a second place finish with 121 points. "I do not feel we had the greatest State meet performance," said Mahomet Coach Neal Garrison. "Our runners worked hard all year to give themselves a shot of getting a trophy again and a chance to win it. They left accomplishing one of those goals. I am so proud of them for how they run and their great character."

Defending champion Yorkville scored 150 points to finish 3rd. The Foxes ran a 35 second split on their top five. They placed third earning a trophy without a runner in the top 25. Sophomore Zach Price led his team with a 28th place finish. "I know the boys gave me 100% of what they had and I couldn't have asked any more out of them," said Yorkville Coach Chris Muth. "Our split just wasn't where it needed to be. If we would of had a normal split we would have really challenged for the runner-up trophy. At the end of the day, I'm very proud of this group and the lack of split is more on me as a coach than their performance. This senior class is going to graduate with the crazy distinction of winning 4 trophies in four years. That is something really special considering before those trophies we had a 25+ year drought."

Grayslake Central's race was a special one. Their overall team time of 74:32 is well within the top 50 team times ever run at the state meet. The Rams would also have placed in the top five in the 3A meet.

"We knew last November looking at our roster and finding out that Matt Aho had decided to run cross this year that we definitely had a group that could put themselves in contention," concluded Centella. "Starting last winter the guys began the necessary process to achieve the ultimate goal of a state title. They put in so much work this past winter, spring, and summer to do everything they could to be the best team possible. Luckily we were able to stay overall quite healthy this season. One of the things we pride ourselves on in this program is running our best when it counts the most. Clearly this team achieved that."

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