

BOYS TEAM PROJECTIONS - 2016 NXN - PAUL SCHMITZ



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High level competition stirs memories that last

By Paul Schmitz for DyeStat

Runners, I want to introduce to you what I call the Paradox of NXN. First, stay focused even though it is past your training season. You have done the work to get here, don't stop now. Don't settle for anything less than 100 percent commitment. Stick with your teammates and give it your all so you can look back on this time with no regrets. Second, don't worry about how you do. Enjoy this time with your teammates and soak it all in. The pressure should be gone. You have made it.

This race is for you. Congratulations. Nike throws a great party and you are one of the select few who have golden tickets.

This time of year, results are about more than ability and potential. Some teams worked to peak last Saturday at the California state meet or an NXN regional and other teams have had long breaks prior to qualifying, so this race is about timing. How many athletes have moved on to a winter sport? How many are now just happy to have made it to NXN and the goal for Saturday is living in the moment and not worrying about a max-out time? How many nagging injuries have built up to the point that a season this long becomes one week too many? Every year we find at least one team is bit by the flu or cold bug after Thanksgiving travels and they can't compete at the level they should despite putting the work in. The margins between many of these teams is thin.

I have a bittersweet story to tell about a team from my hometown that is an excellent case study. The boys cross country team from Willmar MN in 2006 had high hopes of a podium spot. These guys were two-time defending Minnesota state champions and were returning their top four from a team that finished 14th the previous year in Portland. They were coming off a state meet that is still regarded as one of the greatest in the history of Minnesota. To add another dimension to the story, our top five were all refugees from war-torn Somalia and fairly new arrivals to the United States. Some had lost multiple family members in the war, including parents, and they had survived incredible odds leading up to this moment.

The 2006 Nike Team Nationals race was a muddy mess at the Portland Meadows Race Track. Runners slipped and slid through the muck and a few runners got tangled up and went down as the wedge compressed at the angle going around the first turn. In the front of the scrum were the top five Willmar runners. More than 40 runners went down, including the entire Willmar team. At the mile mark, we were in 22nd place out of 22 teams. The guys worked their way up to claim 16th, not even as good as the year before. **Mark Miley**, the coach of the post season team, described the boys as looking like they had been "attacked by a gang of cats." They had mud, blood and spike marks all over their bodies. As they collapsed into the team van, one of the captains and the leader of the team, **Abdi Awale**, famously said "Well, there goes the movie." The producers that had been talking to in-season coach **Jerry Popp** stopped calling. The Sports Illustrated article got pushed to the middle of the magazine and was only half a page instead of the feature we were hoping for. Some of us in Willmar believe that 'McFarland USA' could have been 'Willmar USA' if the stars aligned that day.



Despite the outcome of that race in 2006, this is not a negative story. What we learn from competition at the highest level is that some of the best stories are not the ones with Disney endings. That race still brings smiles to the faces of all those involved when it is talked about. What an amazing experience to have. "Can you believe what happened?"

So, take these predictions with a grain of salt. When the gun goes off on Saturday at Glendoveer Golf Course, not only do you never know what is going to happen, it is likely that some of the best stories won't even make the podium that day.

[**Editor's Note:** Paul has been with the Dyestat rankings team for two years working exclusively with the boys rankings. He is the father of two runners from the Willmar girls teams who will be competing at NXN for the third consecutive year. He is also the principal of Willmar Senior High in MN and the former AD there.]

Wading through the data and spreadsheet after spreadsheet of numbers, an interesting scenario begins to emerge through trial races of the upcoming NXN boys championship: Teams with low sticks are out performing the pack runners that were preferred throughout the year. The pack is stable. There is safety in running as a team and in the massive meets, especially those with

merges like Manhattan, Mt. SAC and Roy Griak, the value of the No. 5 man is paramount. However, NXN only has 22 teams. It is actually a smaller meet than many of the meets that were used to create the top 30 and regional top 5s.

With that in mind, for instance, we have Liverpool NY beating section rival Fayetteville-Manlius, although that order was reversed last weekend. The low sticks of **Ty Brownlow** and **Stephen Schulz** more than make up for the what might be the largest 1-5 spread in the field. Brentwood TN also profiles higher than anticipated, finishing as high as second in the mock races. With **Brodey Hasty** and **Taylor Vroon** potentially scoring 10 team points combined, they are running virtually 3 vs 5 against some of the other teams.

The pack of Wayzata falls more than we had anticipated and the best overall “team” of runners from Neuqua Valley are going to have to move the entire group up into the low 40s range in order to come out on top. In a field with so many quality runners, that will not be an easy feat.

Boys team projections:

1. American Fork UT
2. Neuqua Valley IL
3. Brentwood TN
4. Bozeman MT
5. Great Oak CA
6. Christian Brothers Academy NJ
7. The Woodlands TX
8. Downers Grove North IL
9. Wayzata MN
10. Liverpool NY
11. Summit OR
12. Dana Hills CA
13. St. Xavier KY
14. Cathedral Catholic CA
15. Staples CT
16. Mahomet- Seymour IL

17. Springville UT
18. Southlake Carroll TX
19. Davis UT
20. Fayetteville-Manlius NY
21. Edina MN
22. College Park TX