

IHSA STATE XC MEET: SIX ALL-STATE RUNNERS MEANS STATE CHAMPIONSHIP FOR MAHOMET-SEYMOUR



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Jack & Matt Aho finish 1-2; Jenna Lutzow leads Belvidere North to 2A Girls State Championship

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Peoria --- It was tough for the Mahomet-Seymour Boys team to grasp their second place finish in this race a year ago. Maybe it was fuel for the fire within them this entire season as they turned in some remarkable performances. The biggest one came in Saturday's 2A Boys race as they placed 7 runners in the first 27 to capture their first state championship with only 58 points. Defending champion Grayslake Central (134 points) was second followed by Normal University (188 points). Sterling (194 points) missed the awards podium by only 6 points.

The story of the race was just how well the Mahomet-Seymour pack stayed together. They had all 7 runners in the first 35 places at the mile. From that point on, they just moved up from there. Their split on their top five runners was only 23 seconds. On all seven runners, it was a miniscule 31 seconds.

"It was fun for me as a coach to see so many of them earn All-State status. Our runners worked very hard for years to set themselves up for success. I am very proud of them both as runners and people. They have tremendous character. They are disciplined in their running so it was great to watch them get rewarded in such a big race," Mahomet-Seymour Coach Neal Garrison said. "I am fortunate to have two volunteer coaches (Gary Garrison and Todd Lafond). They have helped our program develop so much over the years. I also owe my alumni a lot for setting us up for success. They say overnight success usually took 10 years. We had well over 10 years of alumni helping us improve gradually over the years to where we could win a State trophy to represent them. But most of the credit for the team really has to go to God. I have no off-season training program. Instead, I pray that God will provide me with the right runners on our team. I put my total trust in God to give me the right runners. On the first day of practice I work with what I am provided. God has really blessed me with a tremendous group. We have 18 runners on our team and all of them are exceptional young men. I could not have picked a better group myself. It has very little to do with any fancy workouts I create in the fall. It has everything to do with God blessing our team with great young men."

Andrew Wallmer led the way with a 6th place finish. He was followed by Riley Fortune (13th), Mathias Powell (18th), Ryan Hodge (19th), Brian Butcher (21st), and Ben Craw (24th) as all-state runners. Gabe Pommier was the team's 7th runner in 27th place. Mahomet-Seymour is the third team in IHSAA history to have 6 all-state runners preceded by St. Joseph-Ogden (1991) and York (1999).

Jack Aho had been down this road before in last year's state meet. This race was a little different. He had a pack of his brother Matt, Jack Franklin (Normal University HS), Matt Richtman (Kaneland HS, Maple Park), and Jacob Gephardt (Sterling HS) with him at the mile as the group passed in a quick 4:42. Aho took a look back to see who was with him. As he entered the triangle, he started to push the pace a little harder. He went by 2 miles in 9:27 as the pack began to string out. Franklin was 2 seconds back as he tried to stay with the defending state champion. Matt Aho was passed as he made the turn around the finish line by Cole Barkocy (Crystal Lake Central HS) who was making a charge for the lead.

Aho's lead grew as he approached the final 400 meters. He defended his title crossing the line in a personal best 14:11. He turned around and waited to see what was transpiring behind him. There was a battle for second as Franklin, Matt Aho, and Barkocy traded off the second spot. In the final 200 meters, Matt made a move crossing the finish line in second (14-26) and in to his brother Jack's arms who was hoping for that moment. It was the second time a pair of siblings finished 1-2. Jake and Luke Hoffert accomplished it two years before this day.

"This feels a million times better than last year," Jack said with his brother by his side. "It felt incredible. It feels so much better the second time. Seeing my teammates cross the line last year was great when we got the title. But seeing him across the line today, its two memories that I will never forget."

The finishes by the Ahos and a 12th place finish by Eli Minsky pushed Grayslake Central into second place. Normal University was led by Franklin's 3rd place finish and the 11th place finish by Jared Shuckman.

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The 2A Girls race was looked at as a battle of two separate match-ups. There was the individual race between NIC-10 rivals Jenna Lutzow (Belvidere North HS) and Delaney Appino (Boylan Catholic HS). There was the battle between the two evenly matched top ranked teams Belvidere North and Dunlap. Appino pushed the pace from the start trying to distance herself from Lutzow as early as possible. She passed the mile in 5:28 with Lutzow only 2 seconds back. The Belvidere North senior was not going to let her get away.

Lutzow was even with Appino as the two runners passed 2 miles in 11:06. It was now Lutzow's turn to make a move. It was one that Appino could not reply to. Lutzow charged away in the final 800 to win in a personal best 16:35. Appino was 10 seconds back in second place. Appino's teammate Grace McLaughlin ran 17:10 to finish third.

"Coming up that incline, I was going to stay strong and finish no matter how much it hurt," Lutzow said. "I crossed the line I was so tired. But I realized that I just did it."

Along with Lutzow's individual win came a state championship for Belvidere North. The Blue Thunder's three runners in the first eleven off set the 34 second split by Dunlap to edge the Eagles 61-79. Freshmen Madison Diercks (4<sup>th</sup>) and Gianna Sagona crossed the line as Belvidere North's second and third runners. Olivia Zaluckyj (40<sup>th</sup>), Sabrina Elder (41<sup>st</sup>), and Alexandria Reza (42<sup>nd</sup>) came in with only a second separating the trio. Dunlap was led by all-state performances by Franny Verville (13<sup>th</sup>), Abby Johnson (23<sup>rd</sup>), and Ayah Aldadah (25<sup>th</sup>).

Vernon Hills ran a great race to finish third with 95 points and only a 44 second split on their scorers. Lauren Katz led her team with a 14<sup>th</sup> place finish.