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# Ray Lewis Reviews: Things We Learned 2016 Season of Illinois Cross Country

## THE RAY LEWIS THEORY

Raymond Lewis  
Dec 21, 2016

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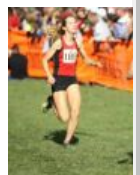
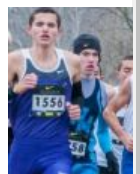


On December 3 and December 10, I was finally about the same distance away from all the Illinois cross country action as the rest of the state.

The Nike Cross National and Footlocker championship weekends felt a little bit like Christmas mornings to me. Illinois enjoyed nearly unprecedented success at the regional qualifying meets for both series, which at the time, felt like validation for the claims we had been collectively making all year long: Illinois is the BEST in the Midwest, and one of the best states for Boys AND Girls cross country in the United States. My personal schedules on both of those two championship dates were built around the livestream schedules for the races. I watched both intently, tweeted from the MileSplit IL twitter account, and poured over results for hours after as if I had lived and breathed the meet myself. Nonetheless, I was 2000 miles from San Diego and 2400 miles from Portland- but my

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Thus has been a theme for my coverage of Illinois cross country this year. I first contributed to MileSplit in November 2014, when **Tony Jones** journeyed far onto a skinny limb and reached out to me to petition for assistance with the Boys' state championship preview that year. It has worked out since then and my second full year of covering the greatest sport in the greatest state is over, and there is no foreseeable end to it. This year was unique, though, in that I completed my job without attending a single meet in Illinois the entire season. In 2014, I was at the state meet I previewed, and in 2015 I napped soundly after hours in the sun during the CCL/GCAC meet and dried my socks after getting splashed and soaked at the Hinsdale Central sectional. In 2016, these luxuries were absent, and I admit to feeling some separation anxiety from action back home. I attended several collegiate XC meets in Tennessee and even watched the nationally-ranked Brentwood High Boys' team run, but it wasn't the same.

And this is where I give credit to where it is due. This season, almost 150 coaches selflessly donated their time and energy to keeping me informed with the happenings on their teams, at their meets, in their conferences, you name it. Many of those coaches also kept consistent contact throughout the semester and all were complete and thorough in their evaluations. The magic of social media and email also brought me in direct (cyber) contact with some athletes, alumni and parents, which taught me this year that the depository of information abounds beyond what I had previously conceived. To all of you who shared your 2016 XC season with myself, Tony, **Alex Goodlad**, and everyone else at MileSplit, thank you, sincerely. You brought the sport that I love close to home for me-even when I was miles away-close enough that I had the blessing of participating with coverage of our beloved athletes and enough that I can write this long article about what we learned this year. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Now, I may have been far but I have paid close attention to all the wonderful events from this past year. And, now that cross country is over and the season of wearing two pairs of socks on the CTA Holiday train (a personal tradition) has arrived, it is time to look back at what the greatest takeaways from this season in Illinois high school cross country.



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### Do not underestimate the mixture of excellent genes and hard training

Last year, for the Boys' cross country state meet preview, I notably omitted **Soren Knudsen** from the individual preview. In my defense, I simply did not think he would win the state meet, but I learned he used the omission as fuel to drive himself to a 13th place All-State finish that year. I quickly learned my lesson, and from the beginning of the Summer to the end of the season, Knudsen was on our radar. If you kept up with our content during the summer, you noticed Soren's training logs that he shared with us, loaded with healthy doses of high mileage and intervention from NCAA- level Minooka graduates. The tough summer clearly put a load on his legs-Soren finished just short of victories at early season meets Hornet-Red Devil and First to the Finish-but it set him up in perfect decision for a dominant season's end, and a top 10 all-time performance at Detweiller (14:02).

Most of the storylines following the meet, however, were driven by the new Knudsen legacy: father-son duo, **Jim** and Soren, as the first ever championship pair. And this is a remarkable story, really! Jim's 1981 championship for Lockport, a narrow win over Lake Forest's **Ryan Stoll**, brought the Porters their second consecutive 10th place finish in the AA meet. Jim ran a swift 14:22, a time that is a top 5 time in almost every race in state history but pales in comparison to the 14:02 that his son blazed by tracking down Lyon's Danny Kilrea over the final mile and pushing, never slowing, until the finish line.

Not to be lost in the 'good genetics' discussion, of course, is Soren's elder brother **Cam**, a force at NAIA school St. Francis (and leader of a strong Minooka contingent: **Joey Santillo** and **Gabe Ceballos** included). A family legacy is always a noble to continue, and certainly it can be argued that Soren was very well predisposed to this destiny of victory. However, for me, this story is singularly about the astounding accomplishment of Soren's improvement from last year, a preview emergence



was void of its own champion. But why ask 'What if'? Because we know what was. The 3A Boys race gave us the fastest front pack in a rich state history of stars... and Soren Knudsen, in 2016, was the greatest of them all.



### The pack running bug was contagious and effective in 2016

Two sides of this coin: one statistical, one anecdotal.

Believe it or not, at the 2016 state meet, pack running was no more prevalent than it has been in recent history- I did a quick statistical analysis of the pack times in the largest Boys' division. The 2016 state meet was only the third strongest state meet as far as pack running-the average pack time in 2016 was 56 seconds, while the tightest meet, 2012, had an average pack time of 49.56 seconds, one of the tightest meets in state history.

What's interesting though is that the 2016 meet had the largest standard deviation in years. This means that there were either unusually wide packs and unusually tight packs-and in the case of 2016, both were present, but the unusually tight packs were the headlines throughout the course of the season. The three NXN qualifying teams (Neuqua Valley, Downers Grove North, and Mahomet-Seymour) ALL ran 23 second splits at Detweiller, while 10 teams in 3A in total ran splits under 37 seconds. This year, success in the state behooved teams to bring all five runners closer together than ever. Lake Zurich was a notable exception, who found themselves in a trophy position despite weekly pack issues-although it should be considered that Lake Zurich finished 5-6 and still finished only in 3rd. From here, there are two possible directions for the state: either the statistical oddity will regress back to the mean... or teams in our wonderful state will catch on and we are just seeing the



Anecdotal bit: my alma mater, Saint Ignatius, also looked to adopt more of a pack-running approach, which has never been much of a strategy for the team until recently. This blog post by coach **Ed Ernst** details the thought process behind this, and a brief exchange with coach **Paul Vandersteen** about this topic, and can give some insight into what teams have had to work towards to achieve late season success in the state.

The post: <https://ernstblog.wordpress.com/2016/10/16/pack-it-up/>

## **The Post-Joe Newton Era looks much different from the Joe Newton Era for York and the rest of Illinois**

I'm only 21 years old, so all I have known is a state cross country scene with **Joe Newton** as a part of it. There are ALSO many people much older than myself who have not known Illinois cross country pre-Newton. Everything that everyone achieved was evaluated relative to the empire, the Long Green Line, Coach himself. It was all about Newton, and I for one could not concept a state without his presence at the biggest west suburban meets in the fall.

This was probably the reason why I was so shocked when he announced his retirement this summer. Tony texted me the news when he found out, a few days before the official announcement, and I'm not sure I was able to formulate a coherent response. I spent many of my meets watching him from a distance, watching him stay hands-on with his massive cross country and track teams, visualizing the legacy built throughout 57 years of leading York's team, embodied through that man right now. Now, the complexion of York and Illinois cross country was permanently changed, with **Charlie Kern Sr.** in place of Newton and the Dukes approaching a period where Newton's legacy and stories about him will slowly replace the man himself.

On the course, the season was a mixed bag for the Dukes. **Charlie Kern** and **Sean MacGregor** were the steadying forces for an otherwise inconsistent team that lacked depth-not the usual descriptor of York. After finishing far out of the top 10 at Richard Spring, York finished 5th at Palatine and appeared set to compete for a top 5 spot at state. However, the worst finish in more than 6 decades for the Dukes punctuated the odd 2016 for Kern Sr.'s team: 16th place, a 99 second scoring split (and 134 second 1-7 split), and for the first time, a wholesome absence from discussion for NXN qualifying.

For many, if not all of us, all we know of Illinois cross country is York, and then the field. But now, post-Newton, this is a new age, and now Charlie Kern the elder's vision must be lived out for this team. But this transition does not have to be a negative for York-a step back and a fresh breath of air during this offseason may even be enough for this program to take the next step for a new adventure, defined now by its generation's own accomplishments and work. This bittersweet time is also exciting for York.

In the days following York's disappointing 16th place at Detweiller, the transition year was punctuated by an emotional celebration back in Elmhurst, sending off coach Newton one final time.

acknowledge this!

So, let's take a moment, and appreciate the history contained the newly closed chapter... but York, who may not seem to be the York we know, is still York. The team and the state looks a little different but I am sure we will find that this will be a good thing.



### There is no foreseeable end to the talent pool in Glen Ellyn

I'm reaching a little outside of my analyst domain for this one; yet, I was still a fan of the Girls' action this year and the biggest division was marked again by a duo of Hilltoppers, old and new. **Lindsey Payne**, still just a junior, played second fiddle once again in the 3A state meet, but this time her tune was different, for it was in harmony with her freshman teammate, eventual NXN Midwest region champion **Katelynne Hart**.

Hart's name came up very frequently this year. Hinsdale's Hornet-Red Devil invitational was her first real encounter with high school competition, and her outstanding 3rd place is nothing to be scoffed at. But it was only the beginning, before she began a dominant streak of eight streak race wins before her first loss in exactly three months at the hands of the nation's best in Portland. Hart's potential going forward is spelled not only by her own talent, but the talent that has preceded her for coach **Paul Hass**.

There have been few moments I have been more astounded than I was when I witnessed **Madeline Perez's** 16:02 state championship run in 2012. In close sequence following her have been **Lisa Luczak**, **Lindsay Graham**, and of course **Lindsey Payne**. The individual success at this school in the past five years has been astounding, although Hart has now already accomplished at state what only



know the 'Hitters aren't complaining.



### The story of 2017 may be the best individual rivalry in years

I write about high school cross country, not NFL football or Olympic track. For that reason, a general principle I follow when writing is to manage storylines and not overblow what is occurring on the state level. These are high school athletes, after all.

Having said that, beginning with sectionals, the postseason revealed a pending rivalry between Lyons' **Danny Kilrea** and Sandburg's **Dylan Jacobs**, both juniors, that is just not possible to ignore. The individual race in Illinois seemed to be wide-open and close before sectional weekend. But at Midlothian Meadows on October 29, Kilrea and Jacobs went head to head and took blows at each other until Jacobs came out just barely in front of Kilrea, finishing a HALF MINUTE in front of OPRF's **Irwin Loud**, and showed that there may be more distance between those two and the field than first thought. Now, although Soren Knudsen came out on top, the gutsy frontrunning on the part of Kilrea (as well as the catalyzing effect of Jacob's chase) shifted the race momentum from a quick state meet to the fastest front end race in state history, dragging five runners under 14:14.

This theme was revisited the following Sunday in Terre Haute, when Jacobs made the primary second mile move and Kilrea made the third mile move, enroute to yet another blow-for-blow sprint down what I always felt to be the longest stretch I've ever run, ending in a 14:53 regional win for Kilrea, just barely four seconds off **Futsum Zeinasellassie's** course record. Jacobs fit in behind him in second and the two led Illinois' first real manhandling of the Midwest region this postseason. Not to



The season ended for these two with the following accomplishments between them: two regional championships, three top regional finishes, and three All-American finishes. But maybe the most remarkable statistic for the state's top returners is this: 14:08 and 14:10.

No third-place finisher has even run faster at Illinois state than Dylan Jacobs, and only **Jim Spivey** has even run faster than Danny Kilrea and not won. Kilrea and Jacobs has asserted themselves as historically excellent runners with six seasons remaining between the two runners. What's more is the relative proximity between Sandburg and Lyons Township- Orland Park's district school is no more than a half hour drive straight south from Lyons. The two power programs run at many of the same meets and will presumably be in the same XC sectional in 2017. The head-to-head matchup between these two in the near future can produce history for Illinois- whether they can break their own Detweiller bests is at the mercy of course conditions but the competitive fire will certainly burn bright.

An interesting line to follow during the track season: Sandburg and Lyons are track teams that typically do not run their best distance runners in the 3200, but rather stack 800 and 1600. Thus, it will be interesting to see where Jacobs and Kilrea compete, clearly two of the best long distance runners in the state.



### **Athlete self-accountability IS a recipe for sustainable team success**

One of my favorite tidbits to share: In 2015, I first learned of the laissez-faire summer coaching approach that Mahomet-Seymour's varsity team enjoys.

"I stay as hands-off as possible during the summer," coach **Neal Garrison** told me. "I have no idea where my team's progress is. They run on their own. I will find out within the first couple weeks of





behind their captains and senior leaders that year to train over the summer together and become a week-to-week power in 2A. The year ended on a disappointing note with a loss to Grayslake Central at state, but the self-organization continued the days after state, and even after Keeble's graduation the team got better and better. **Andrew Walmer** took the harrier reins and **Ben Crow, Gabe Pommier** and **Brian Butcher** were the other leading seniors, and Mahomet-Seymour not only repeated the yearlong success from 2015 but far surpassed it, by beating the best 3A talent during the year, dominating 2A without question, and claiming one of the four NXN at-large bids with their 3rd place at NXN Midwest.

Teams looking to find success in the state should look to 'MSDP' for inspiration-a self-motivating team pulling each other along and running as a team not only during training but also races (remember: 23 second split at state). Mahomet-Seymour graduates a heavy load of runners but has shown that their model yields consistent success. The 2017 Bulldog team has been shoes to fill after the 2016 national qualifying team, but you know this is only going to push any already self-motivated team even further this offseason.

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