

NXN MW Regional Preview: Neuqua Valley Boys, Carmel Girls Project Strong Outcome



NIKE CROSS NATIONALS MIDWEST REGIONAL

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A scene from last year's Boys NXN Regional scene was intense (Colin Boyle photo)

Boys Team Review

Illinois was fantastically deep this year, and there are many teams that can come around and surprise the world with a qualification to Portland, Oregon. However, we have kept our sights on five teams from Illinois with a good shot

of one of the 2+ positions: Neuqua Valley, Downers Grove North, Mahomet-Seymour, Lake Zurich and Lyons Township.

Neuqua Valley appears to be the team most prepared for their run at NXN. The Wildcats have been on the NXN radar all season long, and have had the luxury to train with the postseason in mind. Still, Neuqua Valley posted the sixth-best team time in Illinois history and won the 3A state meet handily against very stout competition. **Jackson Jett** (Sr.), **Zach Kinne** (So.), **Jake McEneaney** (Sr.) and **Matt Milostan** (Sr.) all moved in the second half of the race to garner all-state status. Of historical significance, as well, is that **Scott Anderson** (Sr.) is Illinois' fastest 6th runner of all time (14:55) and **Jeremy Hayhurst** (Sr.) is the fastest 7th runner ever (15:04). This makes Neuqua's floor exceptionally high and the favorite to win the meet this Saturday. A score of less than 100 point is not out of the question for the Wildcats, who will want to take care of business.

Two other team in Illinois appear to be very well prepared for NXN, and built like qualifying teams. Downers Grove North and Mahomet-Seymour shared 23 second scoring splits with Neuqua Valley, and brought their top 7 runners in close behind the scorers. The Trojans of Downers Grove North are the only one of those three teams not to have a state trophy in hand this year, but their team time of 74:09 is the 20th fastest in Illinois history. **Alec Danner** (Sr.) and **Jacob Ridderhoff** (Jr.) were the all-staters for DGN and led a team that had the sixth-fastest 6th runner in IL history and a top 10 seventh runner. DGN has also been beaten this year only by Neuqua, and on two different occasions. The priority for the Trojans will invariably be to qualify but they will be shooting for Neuqua Valley. These two teams should display immutable depth and even the effect from a bad race from a frontrunner will be minimized by the depth on both squads. The only weakness from these two teams appear

to be that an individual finishing in the top 5 is unlikely, but their depth will offset this issue.

Do not leave Mahomet-Seymour out of this discussion, though. The Bulldogs are the 2A state champions and their performance at LaVern Gibson may be the most compelling story of the weekend for Illinois teams. Mahomet-Seymour's pack time of 74:36 is the 38th fastest in Illinois history and they have 6 and 7 runners even faster than DGN's. Mahomet, led by **Andrew Walmer** (Sr.), also dominated their division in a manner unparalleled by any team in recent memory, save for Tolono Unity's 30-point performance in 1A in 2015. Six Bulldogs were All-state and the seventh, **Gabe Pommier**(Sr.), was 27th. This radical success at state was prefigured by Mahomet-Seymour's dominance of 2A all season long, beating conference rivals Normal University who themselves were elevated above the rest of the division. Mahomet-Seymour finished second in a loaded field at Detweiller for the Richard Spring invitational, beating all teams (including Lake Zurich) except Neuqua Valley. Now, on Sunday, the Bulldogs get their second shot at bigger school competition on the largest scale imaginable, and will surely be mixing it up with other potential qualifiers.

Two other schools produced pack times under 75 minutes this past weekend: Lake Zurich and Lyons Township. Lake Zurich's 74:24 was actually faster than Mahomet-Seymour's pack time and ranks at the 28th best in Illinois history. This time was greatly facilitated by **Brian Griffith** (Sr.) and **Matt Pereira's** (Sr.) 5-6 scoring punch that helped vault the Bears into a trophy position, third in 3A. The story all season for the Bears remained the same: can they find a fifth runner to help them make the

next step? But so far, they have answered every call. Lake Zurich won the Palatine Invitational, the North Suburban Conference, the Waukegan Sectional, and the third place trophy at Illinois state. Their pack was strung out and it will face its final challenge, to determine whether the front end power of Griffith, Pereira, **Kyle Griffith** (Sr.) and **Patrick Burns**(Jr.) can get the Bears to Portland.

Finally, it is the fourth place team in Illinois, Lyons Township. Of these five teams, Lyons probably has the most difficult road to Portland, but they have run despite setbacks all season with injuries tearing their pack apart. Both **Danny Kilrea** (Jr.) and **Vince Zona** (Sr.) are good enough to qualify as individuals, and at a meet as massive as NXNMW, this is a solid advantage for the has Lions. But the rest of their scoring runners, which comprised a pack even more disperse than Lake Zurich at state, has some improvement to do before they are firmly in the top 4 conversation.

There are many more Illinois teams registered than just these mentioned! Hinsdale Central, Mt. Prospect, Hersey, York, Maine South, Grayslake Central and Sandburg highlight some of the other Illinois entries. If you are an Illinois runner, root for an excellent showing from Illinois! We could put as many as six or even seven teams in the top 10 at NXN Midwest.

The toughest competition will likely come from Solon Elite XC Club from Solon, Ohio. Although they were not undefeated this year, they did handily win the Ohio Boys' D1 state championship in Hebron, OH on November 5th. Their pack is not as tight as Neuqua Valley's usually displaying about a 40 to 60 second split, but their 1-2

punch of **Joe Riordan** and **Danny Cohen** give them a solid chance from the front.

Also, look out for Charger Track Club, more widely known as Carroll High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The Chargers have come on strong in the postseason and won the Indiana State meet on October 29th, placing 5 in the top 37 and showcasing a 24 second scoring pack. They are also packed at the front, led by **Cole Powers** and **Carter Meyer**. Between Solon and Carroll, these teams comprise the biggest obstacles to an Illinois sweep of qualifying team spots.

Boys Individual Review by Ray Lewis (ray.j.lewis@vanderbilt.edu)-

Before the state meet, answering the question "Who is the best boy's runner in Illinois?" was extremely difficult, and it still is, but **Soren Knudsen** (Sr., Minooka) gave us the most compelling case for himself we have seen from any runner so far this season. Knudsen pulled away from an already surging Danny Kilrea to win in the ninth fastest run in Detweiller history, 14:02, beating out greats like **Evan Jager** and **Donald Sage**. The Northern Arizona commit has only improved throughout the course of the year and has not lost a race since early September. Unfortunately, Knudsen will not be competing in the race due to an injury the race.

Jack Aho (Sr., Grayslake (Central)) is the two time 2A state champion now, and has already made his impact on the national scale by finishing fourth in last year's Midwest region race for a qualifying spot. Different now this year is Jack has been joined regularly by brother **Matthew**, who finished second in the 2A race. The Ahos have expressed a desire to qualify for Portland together, so keep an eye

on the strategy employed by Jack and Matt as they try to make history for Grayslake Central in their senior year.

Jack Aho is not the only returning qualifier, however. **Charlie Kern** (Jr., Elmhurst York) finished fifth and represented Illinois as a sophomore last year. Kern has been in a slight race win drought the past month, losing at conference, sectionals and state. He did win the Palatine Invitational and has just as impressive of a running resume as anyone else in the field... plus, the long finishing straight at LaVern Gibson gives Kern plenty of room to make his typical last second moves in a push to win.

Illinois' future is bright and the 3A race next year certainly can be historic, because although Charlie Kern, a junior, is the fastest fourth place finisher in state history, he is only the THIRD returner in the division. Rather, Danny Kilrea and **Dylan Jacobs** (Jr., Orland Park (Sandburg)) have previewed what may be a compelling southwest suburban rivalry with a battle WAY ahead of the pack at sectionals, where Jacobs finished on top, and then a 2-3 finish favoring Kilrea over Jacobs, resulting in blazing times of 14:08 and 14:10. But for now, they will battle with the rest of the massive NXN Midwest pack, now emergent as legit contenders for the individual qualifying spots.

Many, many other Illinois runners will be shooting for those spots as well. Brian Griffith and Matthew Pereira, of Lake Zurich, have the motivation of their team's cause, as well as Neuqua Valley's Jake McEneaney and Jackson Jett. Vince Zona has been beaten by a large margin by Danny Kilrea the last two weeks but is it very possible he could be Lyons' top runner on Sunday. **Dylan Zangri** (Sr., Oswego East) was one of the most surprising top 10 finishers in 3A and may still be reaching his stride for this

season. **Jack Franklin** (Sr., Normal (University) was the top finisher in 2A not named Aho, and he was followed closely behind **by Matthew Richtman** (Jr.) of Kaneland, who is 2A's top returner for 2017.