

LEADING THE WAY

Garrison a natural choice for area's top cross country coach

By JASON BROWN
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Really, the Champaign News-Gazette had only one option when naming its All-Area Boys' Cross Country Coach of the Year.

That choice was Mahomet-Seymour coach Neal Garrison.

When Garrison started this season, his 15th year as M-S coach, he knew his team had potential.

His runners fulfilled that potential and then some.

This year, the Bulldogs won their fourth straight conference title, sixth straight regional title, fifth straight sectional title and qualified for state for the sixth straight year.

After holding the No. 1 ranking all season, the Bulldogs won the Class 2A state championship at Detweiller Park in Peoria Nov. 5.

After winning the state title, the top seven Bulldog runners formed the Mahomet-Seymour Distance Project (MSDP) and placed 17th in the Nike Cross Nationals, establishing the team as a perennial powerhouse in the area and in state.

"I feel very fortunate to get the award," said Garrison. "I know I am really getting it based off of the success of our runners and their hard work and dedication. So I really feel like I am accepting the award more on their behalf."

Garrison also noted that this award would not have been possible without sacrifices, not only from himself but also, and more importantly, from his runners, assistant coaches, and their families.

The one thing he learned in his career that he didn't know when he first started was just how long—and how many people—it would take to build a strong



Submitted photo

Coach Neal Garrison (right) poses with the state championship trophy alongside his dad, Gary. Garrison credits his family with helping him to his current success.

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NEAL GARRISON

program, and he is grateful for all those people along the way who gave him help

"It means a lot to me as a coach to get the award," said Garrison, "as it really has been an honor to be part of this program that so many runners (past and current), parents (past and current), coaches (past and current), and administration (past and current) have invested so much into over the years.

"So many people have sacrificed so much for our

current team to have been able to be one of the strongest teams in the state and nation."

Garrison also feels like he's winning the award on behalf of his family.

His wife Amber—herself a Division I distance runner for Eastern Illinois University—son Grant and parents Gary and Pam have also sacrificed for Garrison to become coach of the year.

"I think it gives them some validation for all the extra [help] they have given

to me over the years that no one sees since it is behind the scenes," said Garrison. "My wife and kid have had to listen to me talk for years about how to make the cross country program better. My wife's advice and support has been extremely instrumental in our team's current success."

Win or lose, the best part of coaching for Garrison is the relationships he has developed.

"There are so many great runners and families who I wouldn't have gotten a chance to know so well if I wasn't coaching," he said.

Garrison noted that the program has evolved over time, and each year's team has made small steps forward, which added up year after year.

"It has taken many years for our program to get to this point," said Garrison. "Each of our alumni group set a standard for us to try to beat. I know for, at minimum, the 15 years I have coached here, the alumni did a great job of trying to improve upon the team's performance the year before."

Five of the 18 runners will graduate this spring.

Garrison feels fortunate to have been part of their lives for their high school days, but he knows these runners and past alumni have the ability to change the world for the better, wherever they go.

"While I don't want to lose them as runners," he said, "I am actually very excited for them to go out and make a positive difference outside of our team. They really care about people. They are extremely hard workers.

"So I know they can and will impact those around them in a great way."