

Dynasties aren't something where you wake up one morning and — poof — they have arrived.

Dynasties are something where you wake up one morning and realize they have been in the works for years.

Mahomet-Seymour's boys' cross-country team has been on the fast track to success since 2011, when coach Neal Garrison's program qualified for state.

In 2012, M-S captured its first sectional crown in more than a quarter of a century.

In 2013, the Bulldogs earned a conference championship for the first time in 33 years.

In 2014 and 2015, M-S secured back-to-back Class 2A state runner-up trophies.

All of these feats have occurred with yearly changes in the lineup. For the past decade, there was only one year (2010) with fewer than two seniors among the top seven.

"The older guys take care of the younger guys and mentor them," Garrison said. "They want the young guys to do well."

This year's team is more than carrying on the tradition. All seven varsity runners were all-conference recipients in the final Corn Belt Conference meet, meaning they were among the first 10 finishers. Gabe Pommier, Riley Fortune and Andrew Walmer set the pace for the Bulldogs sweeping the top three spots.

At the end of last week's 3-mile race in Normal, the team's top seven were separated by less than 16 seconds.

The conference streak, Garrison said, "is not one group, but due to many alumni who've set us up."

A system is in place that should enable the Bulldogs to remain among the front-runners in the future.

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**NEAL GARRISON**

or seniors."

The depth doesn't create divisive tensions and frustrations within the team.

"They want their teammates to do well and improve," Garrison said, "and they can share in their success. The other runners are important. They help push and make them super strong. We encourage the guys to take ownership and help each other out."

For more than a decade, Garrison has had his athletes chart consecutive days where they've run at least a mile. Pommier and another senior, Brian Butcher, will soon hit the 1,200-day mark and rank first and second, respectively, on the career list. Walmer is chasing 900 consecutive days of running and is third on the all-time school list.

"Running is not a chore for them," said Garrison, who has a streak of running days that has lasted almost 9 years. "They are all competitive and always focused on keeping improving so good things will happen."

The streak, Walmer said, is a source of pride, not pressure.

# Building a runners' dynasty

"There's not a lot of luck in distance running," Garrison said. "It comes down to work ethic, years of sacrifice and setting yourself up. There are no fumbles or errors or bad calls. They've worked hard."

Pommier's conference title marked the fourth time in five years that M-S produced the league champion. Alex Keeble won the 2015 and 2104 races. Forrest Smoes won the event in 2012.

The News-Gazette's weekly listing of top area runners reveals an interesting pattern. Seven of the top 15 times (in the most recent list) were M-S athletes. The Bulldogs' No. 7 runner, based on times, is quicker than the No. 1 runner at 22 other area schools. The depth extends beyond the seven who run regularly in varsity meets. The No. 10 M-S runner has a time (16:26) that's faster than the No. 1 runner at 17 area schools.

"Even our 8, 9, 10 and 11 runners are tremendous athletes," said Garrison, who is assisted by his father, Gary, and boys' track coach Todd Lafond. "Some don't get the glory of being in the top seven until they are juniors

"Having a running streak helps you become a more disciplined and confident runner while also giving you something to take pride in," Walmer said. "Not everyone is willing to put in the work every day, year in and year out."

Brian Butcher was an unheralded runner in junior high school and was never among the team leaders.

"It was many years before he got any payoff," Garrison said. "It took time and work for him to develop. It took until his sophomore year to get in the top seven."

Last week, he became a three-time all-Corn Belt runner. Butcher's progress is not unusual within the M-S program.

"Ryan Hodge is one of the top runners in the state, but he wasn't in our top seven until last year (as a sophomore)," Garrison said.

The Bulldogs will start their postseason trail on Saturday as one of the nine teams in the Normal U-High Regional at Maxwell Park. M-S and U-High have been ranked as the top two Class 2A teams in the state this fall.

See **KRONER** Page B6

# KRONER from B1

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Garrison expects to send the same seven to the starting line that participated in the conference meet — Pommier, Fortune, Walmer, Butcher, Hodge, Mathias Powell and Ben Crow — but his 15 years of coaching the sport have taught him to be prepared.

“We can enter 12 runners on our state roster, and all 12 will warm up,” Garrison said. “Last year, we had to pull a runner out with 15 minutes to go (before the start of the race).”

Powell is the lone sophomore among the top seven and Garrison said, “he’s had to step up quite a bit to run with these guys.”

Crow, the coach added, is “one of the most competitive athletes I’ve ever seen.”

Fortune is the “laid back, fun-loving,” runner in the group, Garrison said, and joins Hodge and Pommier with the leg speed to track down runners ahead of them

in the final 300 meters.

The varsity group is not just good at the 3-mile distance.

“Based off their training, they’d be fine at any distance, Garrison said.

The state series won’t be the end of the competitive season for M-S’ runners. For the third year, the school will participate in a Nike regional meet on Nov. 13 at Terre Haute, Ind.

It’s a five-state meet which will feature at least four other nationally-ranked teams from Illinois in addition to M-S. Only the top two teams are guaranteed of advancing to the Nike Nationals, in Portland, Ore., in December.

“For us to make it, will be very challenging,” Garrison said.

The team plans to put its best foot forward and see where it leads them.