

## NIKE CROSS NATIONALS

# Bulldogs take talents to Portland

## State champs to face competition from across nation

By **ANTHONY ZILIS**

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**MAHOMET** — The fact his team had no confirmation last week that it would head to Portland, Ore., this weekend for Nike Cross Nationals didn't matter. Mahomet-Seymour boys' cross-country coach Neal Garrison didn't want his team to put itself in a holding pattern after finishing third at the Midwest Regional, one spot away from an automatic berth.

Of course, if the Bulldogs discovered they weren't one of the four at-large teams to make the field, utter disappointment would have followed. But that was a risk Garrison was willing to take, so assuming they made the cut was the only way forward.

"It was hard because if they didn't make it, it would just be emotionally devastating," Garrison said, "but I think that's the only way to train to give yourself a shot of making sure you're still strong mentally and sharp and ready to race."

## Region rulers

A look at the Midwest Regional teams that qualified for the Nike Cross Nationals:

### **NAPERVILLE SOUTH**

**Skinny:** Midwest champion (88 points); Average time: 15:32; Top time: Jack Jett, 15:24 (12th place)

### **DOWNERS NORTH**

**Skinny:** Midwest runner-up (136 points); Average time: 15:40; Top time: Alec Danner, 15:26 (13th place)

### **MAHOMET-SEYMOUR**

**Skinny:** Midwest third-place team (168 points); Average time: 15:46; Top time: Andrew Walmer, 15:31 (17th place)

Last weekend, Nike announced that the Bulldogs indeed qualified.

On Thursday at 6:50 a.m., they flew out to Portland, where they were immediately driven to Nike headquarters. The weekend will include tours of Nike's facilities in addition to several activities, seminars and time spent with Nike Olympic athletes.

All the while, the Class 2A state champions will try to stay focused on Saturday's 1 p.m. race.

"I'm really excited," senior Andrew Walmer said earlier in the week. "I'm a little bit nervous because we've never been there before, but it's a good nervous energy."

"I think it'll be a little tempting not to eat all of the food in front of us or to stay out late, partying with whoever's there, whatever's going on. We've just got to enjoy ourselves and not give into all of the crazy stuff that's going on."

Garrison could only coach from afar after the state meet on Nov. 5 because of IHSA rules. While he'll travel to Portland to watch, parents Stephen Craw and Ryan Walmer will be the team's official coaches.

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# NIKE: *'They're still a little bit in shock ... about the whole situation'*

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While in Portland, the team will be given Nike shoes, spikes, sweats and backpacks, gifts which are permitted under IHSA rules.

Garrison wants the Bulldogs to make sure that the extracurriculars surrounding the meet

don't swallow the main event. From his research, he's found that teams new to the meet generally underperform compared to their season standards.

"They're treated like royalty, which can be a big distractor," Garrison said. "A lot of teams are just happy to have made it there, which we are.

We're elated. But (the goal is) to actually both be happy you made it but also go there and compete.

"We're saying we can still get our Nike sweat-shirt, but also go there and race and still go there with a dual purpose. There's definitely a lot of distractors there.'"

The Bulldogs likely won't have any runners near the front of the race. Rather, their strength on the national stage lies in their depth. That's the reason they're in contention to achieve a top-10 finish that Garrison has targeted.

Because of that, Garrison said his team tends

to feel inferior. After Saturday's race, Garrison hopes that feeling is gone.

"We have been ranked nationally all year by (MilesplitIL.com)," Garrison said, "but to actually believe it in their hearts, I don't think they see themselves as that. They see these guys that they read about on these nation-

al sites, and these are incredible runners, but they are one of those guys now. Because they're so humble, they don't realize that, yeah, they are one of the best in the nation, both as individuals and as a team. So they're still a little bit in shock, a little bit in awe about the whole situation."