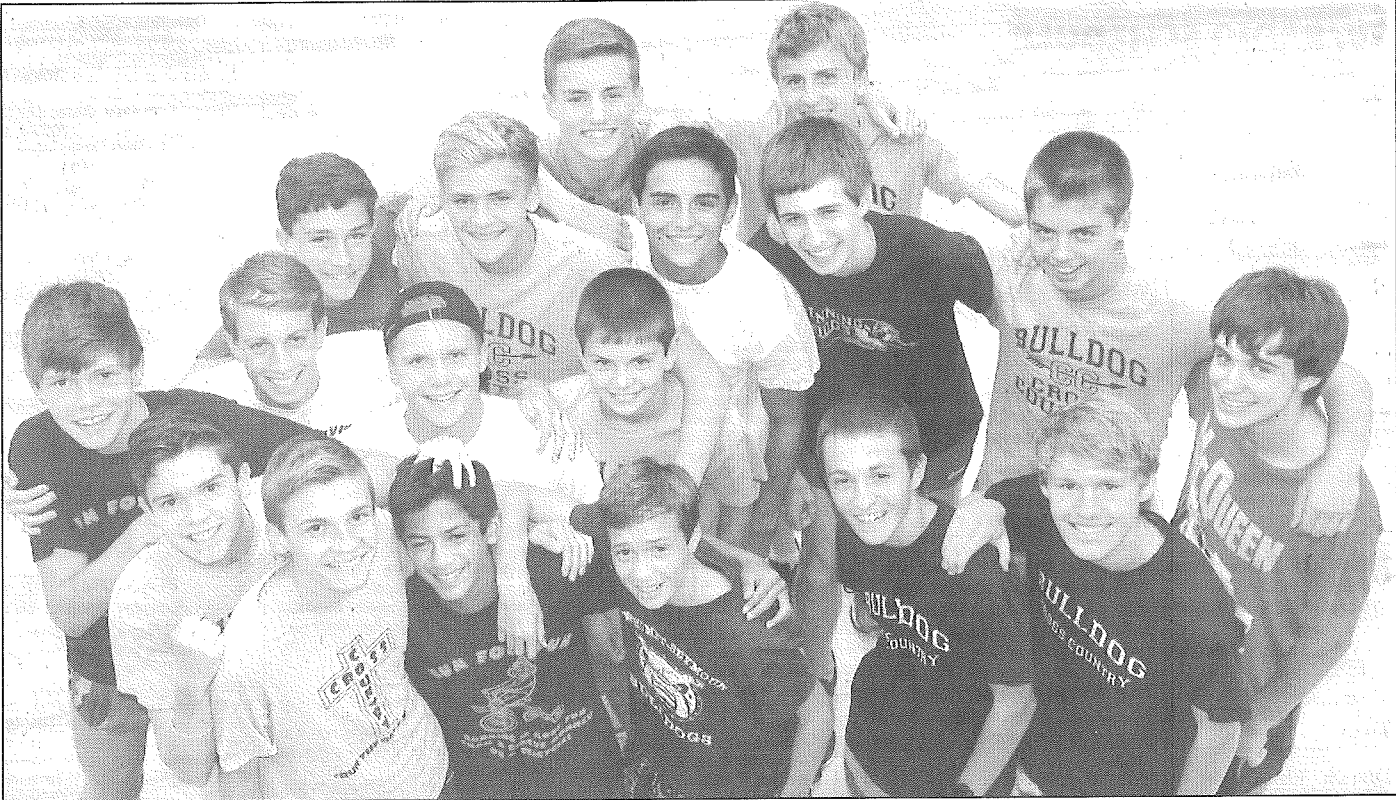


PREPS



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Members of Mahomet-Seymour's boys' cross-country team do what they do best — travel as a pack — at their school in Mahomet. The Bulldogs will be among the favorites to take the Class 2A state title this year.

SMALL GROUP, BIG GOALS

Bulldogs have eyes set to state meet, national qualifying competition



MAHOMET — The sea of seven runners in like uniforms marauding together through the first two miles of a 3-mile race is a common sight at Mahomet-Seymour boys' cross-country races. Usually, those runners pushing and

pulling each other along wear blue and orange.

That's why the second mile of the Richard Spring Invitational on Sept. 17 was such a jarring sight for Ryan Hodge and the rest of the Bulldogs.

First, one runner in Nequua Valley's blue-and-white uniform passed Hodge. Seconds later, another blew by. Then another. Then, the rest of the Wildcats came striding past.

"Once you see one guy pass, you're like, 'Oh, it's only one guy,'" Hodge said. "Then the second one, then the third one, and then the rest of your team passes and you're like, 'Oh, crap.'"

Call it a dose of their own medicine.

Nequua Valley is the only team from Illinois ranked higher than Mahomet-Seymour in Milesplit.com's national rankings, at No. 3. The Bulldogs, who compete one IHSA class down from the Wildcats, are ranked 15th.

But unlike most dominant high school teams, the Bulldogs' roster consists of less than 20 runners, most of whom coach Neal Garrison could easily slide into regional- and sectional-winning teams.

That's by design. Garrison used to recruit athletes, and his total number of runners peaked in the 40s. Now, he lets the school's motivated runners choose for themselves whether or not they run.

"The advantage of a smaller team is that you can take care of them more and more, and they can take care of their teammates a lot more when we're not too big of a team," Garrison said. "We

don't need a massive amount. I just need the right guys, the guys that care about each other."

That total number, though, belies the depth the Bulldogs boast.

During last year's postseason, Garrison swapped out three of his regional runners for the sectional race. They won the sectional event by 45 points. The Bulldogs lost two runners from last year's team that finished second in Class 2A for the second straight year, but they're better this season.

Last year, then-junior Andrew Walmer was the only M-S runner to break 15 minutes at the state meet, and senior Alex Keeble was the only other to break the barrier all season. At Thursday's Corn Belt Meet, six Bulldogs — Gabe Pommier, Riley Fortune, Walmer, Brian Butcher, Hodge and Mathias Powell — finished with times of 14:58 or better.

Garrison couldn't exactly pinpoint how he came up with this large number of elite runners. But since the team made the state meet in 2011, he's had more and more runners who genuinely enjoy the sport, which in turn makes it easier for a large amount of athletes to put in high mileage.

"A lot of it is they just have to like running," Garrison said. "It wouldn't really matter what we do if they thought they had to do it and it was punishment or work. They have to buy in that they actually enjoy running."

"I actually run with them because I personally do like running. I think they see that you can enjoy the sport. So it's not even necessarily about being competitive. If you like it, you put the work in, and they're more likely to put the work in if they don't hate it."

This state series, Garrison will try to allocate his full complement of 12 runners throughout the three meets.

And whatever combination of seven runners Garrison decides to line up will likely run together for the first two

miles of the race, as they've begun to do this season. At the Corn Belt Meet, all seven runners finished within 16 seconds of each other.

For Walmer, who normally leads the Bulldogs, that means pulling back on the throttle at the beginning of races.

"At first, we all just kind of did their own thing like, 'Here's what guys in the past have done, let's just go out and hammer it,'" Walmer said. "This year we've taken the approach of teams we've seen, like York, who have had success with the pack running. Implementing that in practice has obviously gotten us the results."

If they replicate their Corn Belt times at the state meet at Peoria's Detweiller Park, which is considered a fast course, the Bulldogs should put themselves in the mix for a state title.

But they're looking beyond the Nov. 5 state meet. The following week, they'll compete at the Nike Cross Nationals Midwest meet with hopes of qualifying for the national meet on Dec. 3 in Portland, Ore. Garrison has adjusted his team's training schedule accordingly, even though he won't be allowed to coach the team after the state meet.

And while their pack of seven normally dominates meets and will be favored to win Class 2A, they haven't forgotten about that pack of runners in blue and white.

"We look at what (Nequua Valley's) times are like and just compare it, and we know that we have to push harder to be even with that pack or better," Hodge said. "It's pretty exciting for us to know that the last couple of years, we weren't at that potential of running. Now we're there, with the teams that we always looked up to."

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