



Garret Halm/Mahomet Citizen

Coach Neal Garrison, far right, poses for a preseason team picture with his boys' cross-country squad.

BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY

LOFTY GOALS

Reigning state champs can't dwell on past if they hope to repeat

By JASON BROWN
For The Mahomet Citizen

Last year, Mahomet-Seymour's boys' cross-country team completed a dream season that included winning their fourth straight conference title, sixth straight regional title, fifth straight sectional title and the state championship Class 2A trophy.

The team ran the best Class 2A performance ever at state, placing all seven runners among the top 30, finishing with six all-state runners.

The Bulldogs tied the IHSA state record for the highest number of all-state runners and had a final record of 202-1.

But that was last year, and now it's this year.

Neal Garrison, in his 16th year as the Bulldogs' head coach, knows his 2017 team cannot rest on the laurels of the 2016 group.

"We know that we can't rest on the past and that last year doesn't guarantee any success this year," Garrison said. "We hope last year's success and experience help us."

"We hope it doesn't put us in a mindset of assuming we have arrived and that we no longer need to work hard or improve."

Garrison has talked to his runners about trying to not let their guard down just because last year's team had success, and how they cannot afford to settle in their training because "in many ways it is harder to repeat success since we now have a target on our back."

Returning all-state medal win-

ners from last spring's state track meet include senior Riley Fortune, junior Mathias Powell and senior Ryan Hodge.

Fortune and Hodge are fourth-year high school cross-country runners.

At the cross-country state meet last fall, Fortune finished in 14th place with a time of 14:54.

Powell placed 18th with a time of 14:59, which was the fastest sophomore time any M-S runner has registered in the state meet.

Fortune and Hodge were part of the 3,200-meter relay that placed fourth at state in track last spring, and Powell placed fourth in the 3,200 meters in May.

"The experience they gained in the last year of their running should be a great asset to the team," Garrison said.

They are joined by seniors Evan Burge, Joe Churm, Garret Williams and Kyle Sheehy.

"We have a nice group of hard-working seniors," Garrison said. "I am fortunate to have them on the team."

Burge, Bryson Keeble and Kaelan Davis have a good chance at earning a spot among this year's top seven runners.

Garrison hopes his top three runners who finished among the top 25 at state last year can improve to top 10 finishes.

"This is a lot easier said than done," he said. "It will be a challenge for them to get this done, but it would be pretty neat if it hap-

pens."

Numerous other runners are vying for a top-12 spot, including freshmen Caleb Dowers and Joe Taylor.

"I think the team's strength is that they are willing to work hard and have experience competing at the top in the races they have run," Garrison said. "Experience goes a long way in having the confidence in the middle of a race when it hurts mentally and physically."

"We hope our returning runners can help take the new runners under their wing and help them gain experience and confidence quickly."

Garrison credits his returning runners for doing a great job this summer of setting an example of what it means to hard work in cross-country.

At state last season, the Bulldogs ran the 37th fastest top-five runner average (14:54.7) among any team in any class in the past 71 years.

The average tied the fastest IHSA team average record ever by a Class 2A- or 1A-sized school and was the best M-S five-runner average since starting the sport in the 1970s.

A year ago, the Bulldogs also recorded the lowest top-seven team time average (14:58.7) that any M-S team had compiled.

The previous best was 15:26.5 in 2014.

The boys' team is scheduled to begin its season Sept. 2, at 9 a.m. with the Charleston Invitational at the Eastern Illinois University Trail.