

## BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY

# Bus driver plays key role in team's success

## M-S coach credits him with going above and beyond for Bulldog runners at sectional meet

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The journey to a state championship didn't start last Saturday at 8:30 a.m. when a yellow school bus pulled out of the Mahomet-Seymour High School parking lot and headed northwest to Peoria.

That departure marked the beginning of the final leg of a journey that started many months earlier when the varsity Bulldogs began doing the work that they hoped would put them in position to win a repeat IHSA state crown.

There are no guarantees in sports.

Individuals — and teams — can put forth a massive effort and not be rewarded either because an opponent has worked harder or an opponent is physically superior.

Or, it can come down to having a bad day, getting sick or injured.

By now, we are well aware of the outcome from last weekend.

Coach Neal Garrison's program annexed a second consecutive Class 2A state title.

They are the best in the state. Again.

That the seven varsity runners who stood at the starting line for the noon race were fully healthy is — in part — a tribute to more than themselves and the coaches.

A thank you must go out to the bus driver, Dennis Schwartz.

There are surely cynics who think, "Yeah, he deserves credit for not getting lost en route to the race site."

Garrison pays homage

to Schwartz's true contributions.

"Our driver is the best," Garrison said. "We like all our bus drivers, but Dennis Schwartz is our team favorite."

"We owe him a lot as he always takes great care of us."

Schwartz's value was never more evident than the last Saturday in October, when he transported the Bulldogs to the Normal Sectional.

"In all seriousness, we believe that one of the reasons we were able to win the sectional meet was due to Dennis," Garrison said.

The meet was scheduled to start at 11:30 a.m. Garrison likes for his team to be on the premises 55 to 60 minutes before a race starts.

That allows ample time to unload the bus and do a leisurely warmup.

That arrival time was not a possibility at sectional.

"The IHSA requires all head coaches to go to a coaches meeting," Garrison said. "They set that meeting for 9:15 a.m. So we had to arrive almost 2 ½ hours before the race."

Under normal circumstances, the team could hang out and relax together while mentally preparing for what to that point would be their biggest race of the season.

Saturday, Oct. 28, was not a typical day.

The temperature that morning was in the mid-30s and Garrison said with the 20 mph winds, "it put the windchill below 30."

The conditions changed from a "cold mist to sleet," Garrison said. "It was so bitter cold. Our runners were chilled within 5 to 10 minutes of being out-

side and we still had hours before our race."

That's when Schwartz came to the rescue.

"Dennis went out of his way to drive back and pull up the bus for our runners so they could get out of the cold," Garrison said. "It allowed our runners to not get chilled to the bone."

"When that happens, runners have tense muscles for hours. They don't race well. They often get sick the next week."

The Bulldogs avoided that precarious pitfall, staying warm and keeping their muscles loose inside the bus.

Garrison believes that was instrumental in what happened that day as well as the following week at state.

"Dennis really did give us the advantage so our boys could win the sectional meet and increase their confidence going into state," Garrison said. "That win was huge for

our team.

"I am sure Dennis didn't think twice about it, but we talked about it more than once in the locker room the week after the sectional meet."

Schwartz's work day last Saturday lasted a full eight hours before he drove the yellow school bus down Oak Street at 4:30 p.m., following a fire truck and police escort with horns blaring to recognize the newly crowned champions.

For the cross-country runners on the bus, their official work day on Saturday lasted less than 16 minutes. That was the time needed to run the 3-mile course at Detweiler Park.

Months of work boiled down to less than a quarter of an hour to determine the outcome.

Thanks to a man who wasn't even a part of the coaching staff, it was a successful trip.