

• **N-G ALL-AREA BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY COACH OF THE YEAR**

Garrison an easy choice ... once again

His Bulldogs brought home another state championship

By JASON BROWN
For The Mahomet Citizen

Just like last year, the Champaign News-Gazette had only one option when selecting its All-Area Boys' Cross-Country Coach of the Year.

That choice for the second straight year was Mahomet-Seymour's Neal Garrison.

"I know that getting the Coach of the Year award really is just me accepting the honor on behalf of the countless others that gave so much to our program," Garrison said. "I know I am just one piece of the puzzle that made this possible."

"I can't thank all of our runners, their parents, our coaches, and the alumni enough. It really is great to be part of something so special."

For the second straight year, Garrison's boys' cross-country squad won the Class 2A IHSA state championship trophy at Detweiller Park in Peoria.

"I was pleased the boys had such a successful year," Garrison said. "They worked so hard and they deserved it. It is always great to see nice guys do well."

This season, the Bulldogs won their sixth straight 2A sectional title and qualified for state for the seventh successive year.

That does not happen without dedication.

"I am thankful that our team is full of so many devoted runners with the most caring hearts," Garrison said. "Each of our runners has given so much of their hearts to the team. They care so much about each other."

"They are constantly going out of their way to encourage each other and to hold each other accountable. They support each other in so many ways outside of running."

In the last four years, the Bulldogs have won two state titles and secured two runner-up trophies.

"It was a special year in that so many of our alumni and their parents continued to invest into our current team," Garrison said. "Our alumni took the time to write encouraging notes



News-Gazette file photo

Mahomet-Seymour cross-country coach Neal Garrison was named All-Area Boys' Cross-Country Coach of the Year by The News-Gazette for the second straight year.

to the current runners throughout the preseason and season.

"I think our current runners and myself have always felt a sense of obligation to do our best for the alumni and their parents. So it has been nice that both the alumni and the current runners can both still impact the program's success."

To win state this year, the Bulldogs scored a team low of 91, which was 23 points better than top-ranked Normal University High.

And as with his first Coach of the Year award, Garrison tends to deflect the praise toward his runners, alumni and the community's support.

"The current runners and their families, the past runners and their families, and the current and past coaches have all given so much to make this program one of the best in the state," Garrison said. "I am so grateful for all the people along the way that have helped our current team get to where they are now. We know we couldn't have gotten here without so many people setting us up along the way."

But if you ask his runners, they will heap as much praise on Garrison as they can.

"Garrison does a great job of not putting too much pressure on us as a runner," Evan Burge said. "He wants us to do great, and he tries his best to motivate us to work as hard as possible to be the best runners that we can be."

Garrison also notes his runners are a very committed group who can be seen constantly jogging throughout town on a daily basis.

"They are so self-disciplined, which is a coach's

dream," Garrison said. "They are running in the 100-plus heat index and the sub-zero wind chill as a group. It is nice to get the Coach of the Year award, but the biggest reward for me has been getting to know and run with some of the nicest kids in the school year after year."

Garrison said that the program has evolved over time, and each year's team has made small steps forward, which added up year after year, to get M-S to its current level.

"It has taken many years for our program to get to this point," Garrison said. "Each of our alumni group set a standard for us to try to beat. I know for at minimum the 15 years I have coached here, the alumni did a great job of trying to improve upon the team's performance from the year before."

Win or lose, the best part of coaching for Garrison is the relationships he has as a result of being in the sport.

"There are so many great runners and families who I wouldn't have gotten a chance to know so well if I wasn't coaching," he said.