

Sports

MSJHS look to advance to State after winning County Championship



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**photo by Matt Difanis*

By FRED KRONER

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They come from different grade levels, with different interests, different backgrounds, different goals and different motivations.

Individually, they are students at Mahomet-Seymour Junior High School.

Collectively, they are members of a boys' cross-country program which is carrying on the school's tradition for success.

When the young Bulldogs won the 14-school Champaign County championship, it marked the sixth time in the eight-year history of the meet that M-S was the top team.

For some squad members, distance running has been a passion for years already.

For others, they are relative newcomers to the cross-country scene.

"At first, I only did cross country so I could be in shape for soccer," eighth-grader Mitchell McAnally said. "But then I started to get to know the coaches and other runners, and started really having fun.

"The coaches are awesome and helpful and they have planned a lot of fun events during the running season. That's not easy to plan with over 100 runners on the team."

Seventh-grader Kai Jones had a similar experience.

"When I first did cross-country, I was only doing it for endurance and stamina for soccer," Jones said. "It turns out after that first year, I loved it.

"I made a ton of new friends, got so much faster. Now, I do it because it is a lot of fun, and it still helps me for soccer endurance."

Eighth-grader, Hayden Grotelueschen, has changed his views on the sport during the three years he has competed for M-S Junior High.

"My attitude changed a lot from the first day because at first, I thought it was way too much work," Grotelueschen said. "Though after getting in a routine, it felt like an everyday part of life."

Gage Williams' participation allows him to keep in step with his older siblings, both of whom ran for the high school team.

Following his brothers' paths was natural for Williams, now an eighth-grader.

"I was introduced into distance running from a young age," Williams said. "By about age 6, I could run a 5K in under 30 minutes.

"I knew that I wanted to become a cross-country runner."

Seventh-grader Finn Randolph credits cross-country for a transformation in his life.

"My attitude has changed from little confidence to a lot because I know I can count on myself and my team to do well," Randolph said.

Teammate Gabe Difanis also saw running as a way to better himself.

"My attitude about distance running at first was that it would be something that I would do to challenge myself," said Difanis, an eighth-grader. "Now, I think it can be relaxing and a fun thing to do."

Eighth-grader Ben Wallace needed some convincing that there was a place for him in the sport.

"When I first started running I was less open-minded and I didn't think that a less fit person could become a great runner," Wallace said. "I learned that through hard work, perseverance, and dedication to practice, anyone can change how good of a runner you are."

He is already learning life lessons.

"Running is my passion," Wallace said. "Cross-country has taught me being a teammate means more than just participating in the sport with someone.

"It means helping each other and pushing each other to be the better

runners and people both on and off the course. Many of my teammates have become some of my best friends and they are great people."

Winning the recent county championship required the team to overcome some mental obstacles.

"The cross-country meet was tough," Williams said. "With the thunder (and lightning) postponing the race twice, we weren't sure we would even race.

"It was mentally exhausting, being at the starting line pumped up and ready to go, then being told we would have to wait for the storm to pass. With the challenging conditions and still winning, I think that was awesome."

Another challenge was the quality of the competition.

"I'm so proud of the runners for doing so well despite it getting delayed due to weather," Jones said. "We also had lots of good teams such as Edison, Urbana and the home team, Unity.

"It means a lot that I was able to run varsity and help out the team."

Sixth-grader Tyler Clark recognizes the importance of being dedicated out of season.

"I quickly realized the importance of training in the off-season," Clark said. "If I trained more over the summer, my times would improve."

With sectionals coming up on Saturday at Parkland College, the results at county occurred at an opportune time.

"Winning the Champaign County championship made me realize that we have a chance to make state," McAnally said. "There were several fast teams that ran at the meet and we were able to beat them.

"This all means that our hard work has paid off and that we ran hard at the meet."

Randolph said the county outcome was both what he hoped and expected.

"I honestly wasn't surprised we won the county championship because we have a great team," Randolph said. "This just means we are capable of doing well."

Grotelueschen said he didn't approach the county meet any differently than the others on the school's schedule.

"My reaction was happy for me and my team, but I really just saw it as another race," Grotelueschen said.

Coach Lisa Martin has watched the program grow and develop to the point where achieving at a high level is expected rather than a long-term goal.

"This is a very special team to the coaches," Martin said. "As individuals, these athletes are strong.

"As a team, they are a force to be reckoned with. We can't wait to see where postseason takes us."

For the three grade levels, coaches Martin, Lori Clark and Matt Mills were working with a school-record number of competitors, 103.

Everyone got to compete during the regular season before the coaches selected 14 boys to continue practicing during the final weeks.

The eighth-graders are: Gabe Difanis, Hayden Grotelueschen, Mitchell McAnally, Eli Stelle, Ben Wallace and Gage Williams.

The seventh-graders are: Kai Jones, Finn Randolph, Davin Tietz and Isaac Warren.

The sixth-graders are: Tyler Clark, Camden Heinold, Lukas Nykaza and Mason Orton.

From that group, seven will be chosen to participate at the sectional.

Regardless of which runners make it to the starting line, Williams said all of his teammates have been an important part of the process.

"Having the opportunity to go to state would be incredible," Williams said. "Even though only the varsity team would be racing at state, it is the entire team who got us there."

Wallace isn't the only squad member who has learned valuable lessons from cross-country.

"I feel like cross-country made me a harder worker and gave me a better work ethic. Grotelueschen said.

Jones pointed to the discipline, determination and mental toughness which has been a point of emphasis.

"All those great traits have helped me a lot, mostly as a student," Jones said. "For example, sometimes you just really want to stop running, but you can't.

"That's the same as school, sometimes you don't want to keep working, but you do because of your mental toughness from cross-country."

McAnally focused on the same points.

"The mental toughness and determination you have to have in order to run cross-country has helped me to power through some of the hard

questions I get in the classroom and on tests," McAnally said. "I am more disciplined about doing my homework and listening in the classroom."

Difanis is seeing the benefits as well.

"I can always know that if I work at something, I'll eventually be good at it," Difanis said.

Added Wallace: "I have learned that putting in the effort can change any outcome for the better. This goes for running, my school work, and anything else I am striving to achieve."

Running is a sport where improvement can occur.

"I have learned that there will always be someone smarter, stronger or faster than me," Williams said. "This encourages me to rise to the challenge."

Besides the title at county, the M-S boys team was also victorious this season in multi-school invitationals at Danville North Ridge, Champaign Edison and Monticello.

"I say often that I wish we, the coaches, could take credit for their success, but it truly is due to their work to prepare for the season," Martin said. "There is no doubt that the strength of this season is due to our eighth-grade leadership.

"Our eighth-grade boys worked really hard in the summer months to prepare for this season."

Looking to the future, the coach doesn't see any drop-off.

"The seventh-graders also worked hard to prepare for this season and, as we look to next season, they will step up to the challenge of being eighth-grade leaders very well," Martin said.

"With the addition of a strong sixth-grade team, led by Ty Clark, we are a team that will be turning heads for quite a while.

"This is one of the strongest sixth-grade teams we have ever had. We are very deep in talent. From top to bottom, these runners are exceeding sixth-grade times from the past."

Team veteran Difanis is hoping his best times are ahead of him.

"I would like to at least get a personal record of 11 minutes, 7 seconds (for 2 miles)," he said.

As he and Martin reflect on his improvement since entering junior high, the difference is staggering.

"Gabe was sharing with me his times from sixth-grade season, times that were good, but he knew he had a long way to go to be on the varsity squad the following season," Martin said.

It's a message Martin hopes all young squad members take to heart.

"The coaches want our sixth-graders to know that we need all of them back for the upcoming years," she said. "As athletes grow, we can honestly not predict who will be varsity in the future.

"It is really amazing how summer prep can lead to a whole new runner. The secret really is making sure our young runners really are supported and have good role models."

Martin is quick to point out the M-S distance running success didn't start with her.

"We want to continue a tradition of excellence passed on to the current coaches by (former coach) Tom Appenzeller," Martin said.

Saturday's sectional timetable at Parkland will start with the girls' race at 10 a.m. The boys will run at about 10:45.

The top three teams will advance to state as will the top five runners not on qualifying teams.

Thirteen M-S girls have continued training as the postseason nears.

The eighth-graders are: Abby Bunting, Alayna DeWitt, Callie Jansen, Alaina Jared, Ella Scott, Janel Straub and Durbin Thomas.

The seventh-grader is: Ava Boyd.

The sixth-graders are: Emmaline Culp, Reese Gallier, Ava Jansen, Phoebe Truax and Avah Turner.

Martin is optimistic, but believes there's not a large margin for error.

"We look really good this season and have a very good chance to qualify both teams, but also a very good chance that we could be the first team out," she said. "With adding in Bloomington/Normal schools to our meet, we have upped the level of competition.

"Our Bulldog team is ready to take the challenge though."

McAnally is also ready for the test.

"I am expecting for all of us to do our very best on Saturday and to qualify for state," he said.