

15TH ALL-AREA BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY TEAM

TAKING ALL IN STRIDE



Standout didn't love running at first. Now? He can't live without it.

By COLIN LIKAS

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MAHOMET — The date: Dec. 3, 2016.

The location: Portland, Ore.
The moment: Nike Cross Nationals.

This was the final cross-country meet of Mathias Powell's sophomore season.

His time of 17 minutes, 16.2 seconds helped Mahomet-Seymour to 17th place of 22 male teams in the prestigious event.

This result came on the heels of Powell playing a large role in the Bulldogs' first-ever Class 2A state cross-country championship victory that November.

This result also happened roughly eight months after Powell considered quitting cross-country.

HONOR ROLL: NEWS-GAZETTE ALL-AREA BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY RUNNERS OF THE YEAR

YEAR	ATHLETE	SCHOOL	2011	Steve Schroeder	Monticello
2018	Mathias Powell	Mahomet-Seymour	2010	Steve Schroeder	Monticello
2017	Logan Hall	ALAH	2009	Ryan Root	Centennial
2016	Andrew Walmer	Mahomet-Seymour	2008	Tom Pacey	Paxton-Buckley-Loda
2015	Jon Davis	Oakwood	2007	Justin Jones	Oakwood
2014	Jon Davis	Oakwood	2006	Nathan Warstler	Georgetown-Ridge Farm
2013	Jon Davis	Oakwood	2005	Scott Krapf	Schlarman
2012	Nick Hess	St. Thomas More	2004	Scott Krapf	Schlarman

"I was pretty set on doing soccer," Powell said. "I just keep thinking how much different things would be if I had gone to soccer. I'm just really glad I stuck with it."

Powell's prep running career has skyrocketed since that one-month stretch two years ago.

It culminated in the M-S senior winning the individu-

al 2A state title earlier this month and becoming The News-Gazette boys' cross-country Runner of the Year.

And it might not have happened had the 10th-grade version of Powell stayed committed to his initial athletic desires.

Even though his father and

older brother possessed a running background, Powell's first sports foray involved a different sort of movement.

Second grade is when Powell recalls first suiting up for a soccer match. Powell was drawn to the venture, particularly because many of his buddies were involved.

Among them was current

M-S junior Kady Jones, who remains a close friend of Powell's to this day.

"In soccer, even before cross-country, he always was a super hard worker and always a good guy to be around," Jones said. "He knew when to focus and when to mess around."

Powell experienced soccer as a midfielder, primarily focused on defensive responsibilities. He claims he "never really had the speed that you needed to be an attacking midfielder."

Jones, who was a striker on this year's 15-4-5 M-S boys' soccer squad, feels Powell was an "above-average soccer player" who is "pretty much good at everything he does."

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PHOTO GALLERIES: Take a look back at the 2018 boys' cross-country season with photo galleries from various meets in the area throughout the year.



MEET THE TEAMS: Introducing every member of our All-Area teams, **C-3**.

MORE ALL-AREA: Meet our Coach of the Year and see the final area leaders, **C-3**.

What's inside

POWELL: 'I wish I could go back in time'

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And Powell certainly enjoyed being part of the village's youth soccer scene.

"We'd go to these tournaments in Indiana. The whole team would stay in a hotel, and we'd play four or five games," Powell said. "We'd just lose all of them, but just screw around and have a great time. Those were the best."

But it was soccer that pushed Powell into cross-country. Some of those same soccer pals wanted to try distance running in sixth grade. Powell went along for the ride.

His first reaction: "I actually didn't want to do it after my sixth-grade year."

Yet he rolled on. And when he reached high school, he had a decision to make.

Sure, boys can compete in cross-country and soccer simultaneously despite Illinois contesting those sports in the same fall season. Powell just wanted to be fully invested in one or the other.

"I wanted him to play soccer," Jones said, "not realizing how well he would do in cross-country."

Though he was still on the fence as a freshman, Powell raced under Bulldogs coach Neal Garrison and followed the lead of sibling and recent graduate Jackson Powell.

"Mathias had a very strong freshman year — one of the top ones we've ever had," Garrison said. "I didn't push (him to cross-country) up front, but behind the scenes I tried to encourage him. I saw a bright future for him in our sport, saw how he could help the team."

Powell's top clocking in 2015 was 16:09. He was firmly entrenched in M-S' varsity scene, even though he didn't line up at Peoria's Detweiller Park when the Bulldogs placed runner-up at 2A state.

Yet the call of soccer still rang in Powell's ears.

"I was trying to decide because I'd played soccer for so long that

I'd known a lot of people on the team and a lot of my friends did it," Powell said. "But ... cross-country sort of had a different appeal to it."

By the time Powell swept into the Nike Cross Nationals finish chute in December 2016, that challenging choice was a thing of the past.

That Powell sided with cross-country wasn't entirely based on results. He succeeded as a ninth-grader and still pondered leaving the sport.

Tipping the scales was M-S boasting a stout pack of upperclassmen in Powell's inaugural prep year.

Among them were 2016 N-G Runner of the Year Andrew Walmer and Alex Keeble. The latter is the older brother of Bryson Keeble, who qualified for this year's 2A state showcase alongside Powell.

"They were all a great group ... who were just really dedicated, very determined people," Powell said. "They sort of had a lot bigger influence over me (later) than they had my freshman year."

"We definitely had an amazing group of juniors and seniors who not only mentored him, but pulled him and pushed him in practice and meets to get farther faster," Garrison added. "Once he opened up those doors and built so much confidence, it's hard to go back."

Powell ranked third among the Bulldogs in their 2016 state win and was their leading finisher during the 2017 repeat.

This established Powell's individual 2A championship aspirations as a senior.

"I couldn't imagine where I'd be without those (upperclassmen)," Powell said. "(They) just sort of pounded into my head that hard work and consistency, that's really all you need."

Powell doled that out in bunches this year.

Jackson Powell's lengthy workouts intimidated his younger brother

in the past. Now, Mathias Powell was going full bore into his training.

It carried him to the top of the mountain. He not only defeated all 2A competitors on Nov. 3, but also dashed across the line in 14:31.77 — 16 seconds clear of Lake Forest's Nathan Schmitt runner-up finish.

"There were definitely a lot of emotions," Powell said. "I was relieved just because ... I could stop running."

"But also there were a lot of my friends who had come, my family, my teammates and my coach, everybody who was just right at the finish line, and they were just going nuts. It was pretty great."

Jones made the trip north to Peoria and was one of the many revelers clad in orange and navy.

"It's the first time I've ever seen him run," Jones said. "He was winning by a lot more than I thought he would."

"It was so cool to see him finally get his goal. He works harder than anybody else in the sport I know of."

While Powell completed his mission, he simultaneously set a standard for a Bulldogs unit currently flush with youth.

"We knew he had a chance to win state, but he didn't act like it was something, 'I'm better than you,'" Garrison said. "He showed (his teammates) they were important. He invested in them as runners and as people. It's even more valuable than him winning state."

Investment is the strongest thread in Powell's high school cross-country journey. Once he discovered that, he was off to the races — literally and proverbially.

The future member of Villanova coach Marcus O'Sullivan's running Wildcats has only one regret: that he didn't commit to the sport sooner.

"I wish I could go back in time," Powell said, "and just yell at myself a little bit."