

Before the gun: SLUH's Cross Country team

Reviewing the course, getting focused

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St. Louis U. High's top seven arrived at Chaminade around 3 p.m. Tuesday for the cross country Metro Catholic Conference (MCC) Championships and, after stashing their bags under the bleachers of the football stadium, set out in sweats on their regular routine. I joined them on their walk of the 5k (3.1 mile) course, which was laid out across Chaminade's campus.

Senior Caleb Ford led the group, composed of himself, seniors Emmett Cookson, Bill Gabler, and Tony Minnick and juniors Tim Rackers, Joe Meier, and Dan Raterman, across the track to the secluded lower field where the starting line was located. Because of a football practice on the field, they did not go all the way to the starting line, which pressed against the woods at the back of the campus. Instead, they began walking from the first turn about 200 meters from the start, which took the white line uphill.

"Dang, these turns are going to be bad," observed Rackers.

"Tim, all you are going to see is blue," said Raterman, implying that Rackers would have bested the whole field except some of his teammates by that point. Nevertheless, the captains advised the team to take care going around the turn so early in the race.

As the team continued uphill, they allowed themselves to digress a little. The conversation dipped into commentary on SLUH physics classes before a rough patch in the course brought about a return to race strategy.

"Stay high and left!" Cookson called back to his teammates as we walked over a particularly muddy and uneven stretch.

"Don't kill yourself here," said Ford, kicking some crabapples by a fence a little further on.

As we advanced along the line, the captains laid out race strategy in greater detail. They analyzed potential problems on each stretch: tight parts, pack sizes, protruding branches, slippery ground, and other unusual facets of the course, including a cable from a power line.

"Right here could become a bottleneck if it doesn't spread out," said Ford where the course threaded itself between trees.

The course then swept around the front of the school. It remained flat for the most part and went under several more trees before reaching the school's main driveway.

"Alright, there is a grate here. That is bad," said Ford, directing his teammates to steer left onto the pavement.

As we followed the course back to the rear of campus, the talk turned to the competition and the race's dark horse: DeSmet.

"DeSmet wants it," said Cookson.

"What?" asked Minnick.

"It. MCCs. The championship," answered Cookson.

"In viewing their Facebook statuses, they're ready for this," added Ford, who himself follows carefully prescribed rituals the day before a race.

"The day before a race, when you take a shower, you have to wash between your toes twice," he said.

Shortly afterward, at 3:40 p.m., the team broke into a jog. The atmosphere became much more serious, and the conversation ceased for the most part, limited to only major points of strategy. The approximately two-mile warm-up halted only briefly when Minnick got a bit of debris stuck in his shoe, and the top seven returned around 4:00 p.m. to the track and approached the chute that marked the conclusion of the race. The walk and jog exemplified SLUH's ideal of pack running—a tight-knit team philosophy.

"You can't perform like a unit unless you do things really tightly," said Linhares.

With the race only half an hour away, the team made its way back to camp beneath the bleachers, where JV and freshman runners were gathering for their later races. After a brief break during which they collected their bags and spikes, they circled up on the tarp and stretched. The routine consisted of butterfly; figure 4, a toe-reach; Sean-lock, in which a runner supports himself with one leg and two arms behind him and crosses his other ankle over the knee; quads; hamstrings; and Achilles.

"Contrary to popular belief, Emmett Cookson is racing!" Cookson yelled to no one in particular from his position in a Sean-lock. When I asked him why popular belief might make that mistake, he said that he had had a cold earlier in the week and was on the bubble for Tuesday's race. Linhares had not made clear that Cookson and not senior Ben Ford, Caleb's twin brother, was starting on the top seven.

With stretching completed, the team started to don race gear. Some had boxes for their racing spikes, but Cookson set down an immaculately organized case containing his red, green, blue, and yellow spikes next to his half-full gallon jug of water. He pulled a small temporary tattoo from the case, walked over to a nearby retaining wall with his jug, and applied the Nike Nationals tattoo to his biceps.

"I got it when I broke 17:00 at Rim Rock on a horrible day, so I thought I'd save it until MCCs," he explained.

Then assistant coach Joe Porter marched through camp and called the top seven to the line, "Varsity, we're ten minutes out. Let's go!" He counted the starters as they assembled just outside camp. Ford was the last to arrive.

"There's six, there's seven," Porter counted.

"It's been 31 days since I wore these shoes," remarked Ford as he ambled into the huddle of the top seven, Porter, and Linhares, assembled next to the concession stand.

"You can't perform like a unit unless you do things really tightly."

-coach Jim Linhares

CHALK

(from 5)

play the Golden Griffins. As it is in all competitive games, ball control played a major role. But, in the special case of Vianney, so was physical play.

"Whenever we play Vianney there's always a physical game and we usually can play with them for 40 or 50 minutes. But after that the play starts to get to us," Martel said.

Because of the physical play, the Varsity-bills would send the striker on a fast break to create some chances, but the Griffins would just shut them down. However, the strategy made the Griffins run, fatiguing them. The first half ended in a deadlock, 0-0.

The second half was a disappointment for the U. Highbills. They would get the ball low, but then they would try too hard to get a pass into the middle. The pass would be intercepted and then taken the other way.

Then SLUH committed a weak foul, and the ensuing shot was redirected into the post, but the same Griffin followed his shot and put the ball into a wide open net. The goal

OSBORN

(from 5)

"Tim has gone through a tremendous amount," said Stevenson. "He has had a very rough decade plus."

On Aug. 1, Osborn was found outside Busch Stadium. Stevenson, who grew up with Osborn, asked Osborn to live with him until he got his feet back on the ground. Osborn is currently living with Stevenson and works part time at Fortel's Pizza Den in Affton.

Several Mehlville graduates became aware of Osborn's situation and started a project named "Operation Ozzy" to help him. Operation Ozzy, started by Mehlville graduate Curtis Reville, has worked diligently to help give Osborn medical and dental help and a strong foundation to enter a more normal lifestyle.

"What has been amazing is the reaction," said Stevenson. "We have had numerous people step up to help him, such as the dentist who is doing the work on him for free. The oral surgeon is doing work on him for free. We have a graduate who is a lawyer. His law firm is setting up a trust fund for Tim and he is doing that pro bono."

The SLUH community can offer its

gave the Griffins a 1-0 lead, and that was all they needed.

Eight minutes later, another shot got past senior goalie David Kirner. The Griffins crossed the ball and the striker headed the ball into the top corner.

Vianney led 2-0, and after the second goal controlled the speed of the game. SLUH had some good efforts and good scoring chances, but the Vianney defense would always steal the ball, work it up the field, and apply pressure to the U. High defense.

At the 10-minute mark, a Griffin was dribbling down the left sideline when the ball got away from him. In an effort to save the ball, he slid and chipped the ball into the goal box, where another Griffin shot the ball into the opposite corner. The Griffins continued controlling the game, and closed the game out with ease, winning 3-0.

After playing O'Fallon last night, the Jr. Bills will play DeSmet at 2 p.m. on Saturday, MICDS at SLUH 6 p.m. on Monday, and Whitfield on Thursday at 6 p.m.

help to Operation Ozzy on October 23 by attending the district game between SLUH and Mehlville, a charity benefit for Osborn. Tickets will cost two dollars at the front gate, three dollars lower than SLUH's entry price, but there will be an Operation Ozzy booth accepting donations outside of the stadium.

"One of the things Tim did over the years at Mehlville was a cheer called 'Down by the River,'" said Stevenson. "Part of the ceremony will be Tim doing the 'Down by the River' cheer with the team."

T-shirts picturing Osborn and saying "Down by the River" will be sold for \$10 as well and will also help to raise money for Osborn.

In addition to the money raised, Mehlville will unveil a specially painted portion of the bleachers just for Osborn. This section will belong to the superfan forever.

"We want to have people who he has touched over the years come back and help him and honor him for how he was such a major part of their lives," said Stevenson.

"The goodwill that Tim has spread over the years as an ambassador of goodwill and an ambassador of loyalty as Mehlville's

XC

(from 11)

Linhares offered a few last words of advice and, in light of the wet and cool conditions, of caution. "Don't try to cut anything sharp out there. Swing wide and cut it," he said. "Jog to the line, boys!"

At the line, the team ran through its last warm-ups—strides. Strides are short brisk bursts of running to prepare the body for performance. Linhares described them as six seconds of energy.

"It's good to start a race with a little bit of a sweat," he said.

On the last stride out, the team broke their rhythm for one final huddle, hands held in the middle.

"We are covering them in mile one," said Linhares before reiterating the safety concerns. "Other than that, we're punching it!"

He then led a prayer and concluded, with the team joining him in unison, "One, two, three—let's go SLUH!"

The team ran their last stride back to the line as Porter yelled after them, "Bring some intensity now, let's go!"

At the line, the team stripped from sweats to singlets and took its place. An official reminded the teams of starting procedure and stepped to the side. Then the runners leaned forward, seven of 35 men vying for a title and waiting for a gun.

MCC XC RESULTS

INDIVIDUAL PLACEMENT

- 1st Caleb Ford 16:15
- 2nd Tim Rockers 16:16
- 3rd Emmett Cookson 16:20
- 4th Joe Meier 16:30
- 7th Tony Minnick 16:40
- 10th Dan Raterman 16:59
- 12th Bill Gabler 17:30

TEAM PLACEMENT

- 1st SLUH (17 points)
- 2nd DeSmet (46 points)
- 3rd CBC (84 points)
- 4th Vianney (110 points)
- 5th Chaminade (126 points)