

# Motivation, Ruiz's grit propel Tigers

## ■ Fifth-place tie helps Urbana advance; Central, Centennial sectional bound

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CHARLESTON — Greg Johnson struggled to contain his glee. Not that it really mattered.

The Class AA cross-country regional is made for teams like Johnson's Urbana boys' squad. They arrived Saturday at the Eastern Illinois campus on the edge of the picture: Five of the 10 teams in the race advance to next Saturday's Centennial Sectional. Centennial and Champaign Central were locks. Nahomet-Seymour and Charleston figured to advance.

### CLASS AA REGIONAL



**ROLANDO**

That left one spot for several teams of similar strength, including Urbana.

The edge could have gone to Mount Zion, whose Josh Vake-man and Blaise Carie finished 1-2 Saturday. Or it might have gone to Decatur Eisenhower, which finished 30 points in front of Urbana at last week's Big 12 Conference meet.

The Tigers, though, summoned whatever reserves they possessed and managed to tie Mount Zion for the fifth spot, three points ahead of Eisenhower. Per IHSAA rules, both Urbana and Mount Zion advance to the sectional.

"The guys really wanted this," Johnson said. "They were more loose and ready to run than any team I've coached."

Johnson played a role. For four of the class periods Thursday — and seven of the eight periods Friday — Johnson sent notes to the classrooms of each of his runners. Written on them were motivational messages.

The result?  
"Four of our top five guys set (personal records)," Johnson said.

And then there's the case of Emilio Ruiz, who didn't compete at the Big 12 meet. He finished 10th Saturday, third on the team behind 19th-place Patrick McCall and 24th-place Lance Ggett.

It deserves mentioning Ruiz was running with a pinched nerve in his hip.

"He decided to run anyway," Johnson said. "He didn't even stay for the awards ceremony because he was so worried about it. Talk about a kid who wants it. That's spectacular."

"I told him I want to Xerox (an X-ray) of his hip and put it up in my classroom."

The Tigers and Mount Zion each had 155 points.

"For some schools, going to state (is the goal). For some, doing well at state," Johnson said. "But this is everything (for us)."

For Big 12 champ Centennial, the relevance falls into the former category. As expected, the Chargers dusted the field, putting their top five among the 15 finishers. Third-place Dan Rolando (8:08) led the way for the Chargers, who raced without an ill Joe Leach, their No. 3 runner at the Big 12 meet. That's where Centennial swept the spots.