

Boys cross country looks to continue success

By Dani Tietz
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Coming off an 11th-place finish at the IHSA state finals last season, the Mahomet-Seymour cross country team has been ranked preseason ninth in the state by Dye Stat IL.

Head coach Neal Garrison agrees with the ranking, although he understands other teams out there are working as hard as his team.

"This year we'll see," he said. "I do believe our guys are strong enough to be better than last year. They've done the work, and they've got the experience. We'll see if it all works out. We can't control the other teams."

Although the Bulldogs graduate key runners' Jonathan Schaap and Matthew Chupp, they return a strong cast of runners who trained by running anywhere from 10 to 20 miles a day for seven days a week during the summer.

"It really just comes down to endurance," Garrison said. "The nice thing about cross country is it really comes down to work ethic. Once they feel a little success they want to work a little harder, and our guys have worked pretty hard in the past years. I can't guarantee success this year, but they've had a lot of success."

Returning senior Forrest Smoes finished 11th at state last year. Dye Stat IL predicts she could be in the top five runners this season.

Also returning from the State team are seniors Ethan Russell and Curt Kuperferschmid, junior Jackson Powell, sophomores Alex Keeble, James Williams, Jake Keller, Jack Hyde and Joey Magyar. Since Garrison took over the program 12 years ago, the cross country program has grown to include 31 boys on this year's team. "The older guys set the tone for the younger ones," Garrison said. "Even our junior high guys are starting to run more."

The boys cross country team qualified for state for the first time in school history two years ago. Last year's team also won Regionals and Sectionals for the first time in 30 years. They won the Charleston Invitational, Springfield Open Race, East Peoria Invitational and the Metamora Invitational.

While their goal is to win the Cornbelt Conference, they got second last season.

"Physically they've worked their miles to where they can handle that, but they also gain confidence," Garrison said. "Once they've done it they know it's humanly possible, so they do it again."

Garrison said the team often sacrifices the earlier meets to do well late in the season. While the boys are on a 60-

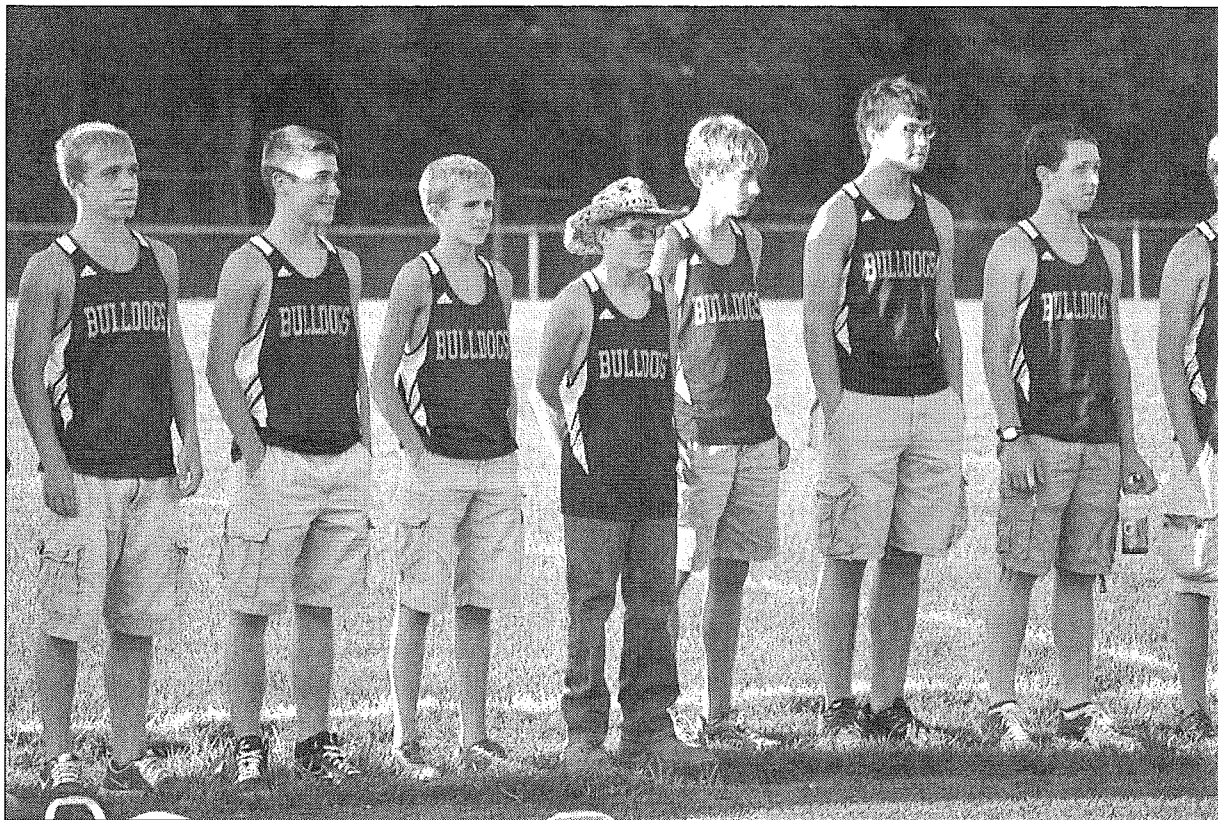


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The boys cross country team will begin its season Sept. 7 at the Charleston Invitational.

to 80-day training program, which includes long runs, the last four to six weeks of the season, Garrison shortens their distance and starts to work on their speed.

"Hopefully if all goes as planned, our best times are in our last meet," he said.

Although wins are nice, Garrison said the team is stronger than just success. The upperclassmen encourage the underclassmen to push themselves both on the course and in the classroom.

"It's not a pecking order of seniors against sophomores," Garrison said. "They take them under their wing like younger brothers. They are representing a whole team."

Garrison keeps track of the most improved runners over the year to encourage incoming freshmen and sophomores to understand how hard work can help them improve.

Seniors Daniel Mittendorg and Nathan Cebulski were nearly cut as freshmen because their times were so slow. Now they are included in the Top 10 runners who have improved during their four years of high school.

"It's great to see them not giving up," Garrison said.

"I know it's frustrating. I know it physically hurts, and probably more so mentally hurts. But that's encouragement for the guys who are at the bottom of the pack."

The boys also push each other in the classroom. Garrison said 75 percent or more of his student-athlete receive academic letters each year. Even if the student does not start there as a freshmen, they end up there as a senior.

The family atmosphere is also fostered by the boys' parents, who host a dinner for them on Friday nights before a cross country meet.

"They'll remember their fastest time in high school, but a lot of it is those friendships," Garrison said. "Most of them will probably be lifelong friends. They genuinely care about their teammates."

The boys cross country team will begin their season on Sept. 7 at the Charleston Invitational.

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