

BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY

AIMING HIGH



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Mahomet-Seymour senior Andrew Walmer is the school's first News-Gazette Runner of the Year. Walmer placed sixth in the Class 2A state meet earlier this season as the Bulldogs won a state title.

First-year inspiration pays off in final run

By **ANTHONY ZILIS**
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MAHOMET — It was a feeling Andrew Walmer never wanted to experience again.

The Mahomet-Seymour cross-country runner finished a spectacular race three years ago — his freshman year — at the state meet. It came seemingly out of nowhere, but his teammates around him were disappointed.

After spending the season as the team's sixth or seventh runner, Walmer led the team by finishing 62nd in 15:52. While that meant Walmer ran a season-best race, it also was a bad sign for the Bulldogs, who finished a disappointing 15th.

"Although I had one of the best races of my life up to that point, it still didn't feel like it because all of

the guys around me were so down about it," Walmer said. "At that moment, I thought to myself, 'I never want to be in that position again.' Everyone else thought that way, too."

Walmer and his teammates began improving every running-based aspect of their lives. They trained more consistently. They ate more fruits and vegetables and cut out unhealthy foods. They went to sleep earlier at night.

"We started ... just trying to improve ourselves in every way we could while avoiding all of the bad stuff," Walmer said. "After three years, it's finally paid off."

As a senior, Walmer is experiencing what was once a far-off dream.

Please see **WALMER, C-3**

N-G Boys' Runners of the Year

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

N-G Boys' Coaches of the Year

YEAR	NAME	SCHOOL
2016	Neal Garrison	Mahomet-Seymour
2015	Dike Stirrett	Unity
2014	Dave R Emmert	Monticello
2013	Dave R Emmert	Monticello
2012	David Behm	St. Thomas More
2011	Dike Stirrett	Unity

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Coach of the Year: M-S' Neal Garrison. **C-3.**

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WALMER: 'None of us could have gotten this far alone'

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Walmer is the No. 1 runner of a team that won the Class 2A state championship and qualified as one of 20 teams in the nation for Saturday's Nike Cross Nationals race. For those accomplishments and his area-best time of 14 minutes, 40 seconds at the state meet, Walmer was named The News-Gazette's Boys' Cross-Country Runner of the Year.

"He's just been progressing each year and doing a little more work each year," M-S coach Neal Garrison said. "He's just so disciplined. He's very calculated on trying to improve. He's never really settled on, 'I'm one of the best in the area' or, 'I'm one of the better runners in the conference.' He's always thinking, 'How can I get better at the next level,' which has, of course, helped drive our team to be a lot better as well."

For Walmer, that state meet three years ago began a trend of fantastic state-meet performances. For the team, it signaled a tipping point.

"I decided I didn't want to be a guy that was just along for the ride," Walmer said. "I wanted to move the team to better places."

Enjoying the sport

Along the way, Walmer was never alone. The key to building a program, Garrison, Walmer and several M-S runners decided, was to simply make it fun.

Throughout the summer, Walmer and his teammates gathered at Lake of the Woods each night. A few times each month, runs were followed by some sort of special event, whether it was a cookout, a team trip to Steak 'n Shake, a game of ultimate frisbee or a trip to Champaign to



Heather Coit/The News-Gazette

Mahomet-Seymour's Andrew Walmer (6) will turn his attention to track and field after the Bulldogs compete in the Nike Cross Nationals event this weekend. Walmer and the M-S boys' cross-country team took down the Class 2A state title this year, with Walmer leading the team in sixth place.

catch a movie.

"I think that's one of the reasons we've been able to improve over the past few years," Walmer said. "You can't just have monotony when it comes to running. You can't just do the same things, day in and day out. Otherwise, guys just aren't going to have fun."

"It's really great being around the guys on the team, but if you're just doing the same thing every day, guys are going to start bickering and start getting ticked off with each other. Doing something fun every once in a while, it kind of resets things. It's fun."

Each year, the Bulldogs' summer running numbers grew, and their performance at the state meet improved. Before Walmer's sophomore year, several runners showed up to run each day during the summer, and M-S took second at the state meet with 134 points later that season.

The next year, the Bulldogs were ranked No. 1 throughout Walmer's junior season but finished second at state, a disappointment for a team that expected a title, but still an improvement.

Walmer has led that steady rise.

Whether others on his team ran well or didn't, Walmer ran a personal best every year at the state meet. After running 15:52 his freshman year to lead the squad, he took third on the team in 15:28 in his second year. Last season, he led the team with a time of 14:48.

"He does an incredible job of getting more excited about the race than nervous (at state)," Garrison said. "He knows exactly what he's capable of, and he never really tried to overperform and he never felt pressure that he needed to do something better than he could do at the time. We were never nervous about him not performing

just because of how he calculates everything in his head more than getting emotional or worked up in a bad way."

Reaching the top

Finally, the payoff came.

Like in the previous year, the Bulldogs were ranked No. 1 throughout the 2016 season. This time, though, they were a juggernaut.

M-S was strong and deep. Although Walmer was its top runner in the end, the team's seven scoring runners usually ran as a pack, and all had run under or just a few seconds over 15 minutes.

On an unseasonably warm day at Detweiller Park in Peoria, six M-S runners streamed across the line in the top 25 to earn all-state status, and one more came in two places later.

The Bulldogs' score of 58 was 76 points better than second-place Grayslake Central, and out of the 30 state champions

since the switch to the three-class system, their separation between first and fifth runners was the second smallest.

Like he had two times prior, Walmer led the way, this time with a sixth-place time of 14:40. His individual performance, though, wasn't his primary concern.

"Most athletes, the last person they want to beat them is their teammate," Garrison said, "but I think these guys did an incredible job of encouraging and supporting each other and realize that it wasn't just about them, it was about winning state. They had to make sure that their teammates performed well."

The Bulldogs were happy, but not jubilant. They had one lofty goal remaining.

One week later, they headed to Terre Haute, Ind., for the 5-kilometer Nike Cross Regional race. While they didn't come away with one of the two automatic qualifying spots for the Nike Cross Nationals race in Portland, Ore., they finished third, and last weekend they were one of four teams to earn an at-large bid.

M-S won't have a runner near the front of Saturday's race. Instead, it likely will have a pack of runners farther back, bunched together. Walmer likely will lead the way, but his teammates will not be far behind.

For Walmer, that's what's made this season special. Individual accolades aside, his team always is celebrating right beside him.

"Honestly, none of us could have gotten this far alone, so we kind of owe each other everything," Walmer said. "Making it to nationals, it was an entire team effort, so that's made us a tight-knit group."