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Cross country runners step up for new season

By Jon Kingdon



Dylan Gunn Photo provided

The ice has finally been broken for California high school sports. With the state in the purple tier, the Lamorinda high schools on Feb. 1 began their track and field, cross country, swimming, golf, and boy's tennis programs. Girl's tennis will begin on March 22. Though the track and field teams are practicing, their seasons do not officially begin until March 15. The cross country team's season will conclude on March 13 so the runners will simply move on to the track team, which begins their competitive season on March 15.

COVID-19 remains a major concern, with the idea of official competitions for the cross country and track teams still in the process of being formulated. "It's an interesting situation as we are in unprecedented times," said Tristin Tool, who is the head coach for Miramonte's cross country and track teams. "It's cross country season right now but it's unrecognizable. There are not going to be competitions with other schools, but we will have some time trials amongst ourselves. Still, it's been really nice to be back coaching since we haven't had an official practice in 11 months. It's a little chaotic which is understandable due to a lot of new rules."

Despite all the difficulties, the coaches and athletes are glad to be working out as a team. "There is certainly a sense of relief and a little bit of apprehension because we constantly have to deal with the spectrum of emotions that everyone has been dealing with," said Acalanes' cross country head coach Jeff Hutson. "The kids have responded energetically. They have been really anxious to get out and be around their peers and get some exercise. It's been a fantastic experience for us just to see how excited the kids have been to get out to run and train."

Dylan Gunn, a senior at Campolindo, who led the team to the state championship last year, has taken on more responsibilities: "I took on as much of a leadership role as I was able to because our workouts were limited to small groups. I did not run with a lot of the younger kids because we were not allowed to have groups larger than 14. However, I was able to talk with them in our Sunday Zoom sessions, which were arranged by Coach (Chuck)

Woolridge. We did a lot of team building and talked about what it means to be a part of a team which was a way for us to have a more cohesive group."

Normally the cross country team competes in the fall and the track team competes in the spring. Starting off in the winter season, with the colder, wetter and windier weather than the teams are used to, has not proven to be a factor. "Actually, this time of year would be our first week of practice anyways," said Acalanes head track coach Joe Escobar. "We would have about a month before our first competition so it's not that big of an adjustment."

"I welcome that kind of challenge and the kids do as well," Hutson said. "That's been one of the most pleasant surprises to me. We're doing practices at 7 a.m. two days a week when it's been 32 degrees and every kid has been showing up and they're charged and raring to go. It's so cool."

Besides the cooler weather, sundown comes earlier than the teams are used to, said Gunn: "At the beginning of the year, we always have the right clothing for the weather. What's different is that we must be efficient with our time because there is only so much light, but beyond that, there is not a whole lot that we are doing differently other than just trying to be smart and doing the basic stuff."

With the teams not being able to compete head-to-head, it's forced the teams to find ways to adjust. Acalanes is planning to do a virtual head-to-head meet with Las Lomas and Northgate. To avoid any type of contact, one team will run at 8 a.m., one at 10 a.m. and one at noon. The teams will then post their times

to athletic.net to see who ultimately wins the meet.

As a rule, showing for practice with one's cell phone in hand would be grounds for discipline. It's become de-rigueur for every athlete due to the protocol requirements set in place. "When I wake up in the morning, I receive a text that asks me three questions," Gunn said. "They ask, 'Do you have any of the symptoms that we have listed? Does anybody you know have any of these symptoms? Have you been exposed to anybody with COVID-19 within the last 14 days?' If you answer no to all the questions, you are then cleared for that day."

The athletes will receive a green sign on their respective cell phones which they will have to show to their coach before being allowed to practice with the team.

It doesn't end at that point for Escobar. "We're doing all we can to keep the kids spaced as they step on to the track. We're screening the kids with the company Nurse Health Screening which the school provided us with. We encourage our kids to get tested. We're doing every measure we possibly can, to keep kids safe but still getting them out there."

Not being able to defend their state championship is particularly disappointing for the boys' and girls' Campolindo team. "It's totally frustrating," said Gunn. "I thought that we were going to return with an even better team and possibly make the national championship. I'm just happy to be able to train with my teammates and build new memories that will last forever, being able to spend that time with my friends."

It's equally exasperating for the Acalanes cross country team as well, said Hutson: "It's not even measurable. Our boys were poised to win NCS this year and our girls were poised to podium. It's been one of the most challenging things for us to know what we have and not being able to compete. It's a disservice to the kids." Hutson singled out Nicolle Frigon, Lauren Yee, and Lena Johnson as standouts on the girls' team and Ed Balsadua, Tyler Hunt, Bennett Dodge, Loid Windfuhr-Durand, and Ethan Childes for the boys' team.

Tool's top runner is Audrey Allen who will be running for UCLA next year. "She is one of the better cross country runners in the state and is looking to do the same in track. For a lot of our juniors, this should be their time to shine but, unfortunately, we won't have times. We will have results from the time trials, but I don't know how much weight college coaches will put on them because they are not official. We're young and building on the boy's side. Ricky Davis is looking very promising. He is a junior and just started last year and is coming into his stride."

The Campolindo boys' team is returning four of their top seven runners from last year. Besides Gunn, senior Owen Lekki, junior Rhys Pullen, and sophomore Alex Lodewick would have been the foundation for the team this year. The Campolindo girls graduated four of their top seven runners at the state tournament last year. Still, with a number of talented runners returning, the Cougars would have again competed for the state title.

Tool has a fairly young team that has been good for a couple of years and has found a way to take advantage of the college quarantines to help his team. "I have recruited some alumni to help me coach because I have had to split between the cross country and track team. I have some great alumni like Cassie Haskell who runs for Cal is now coaching the frosh-soph and JV girls. I have some alumni who are 'attending' schools on the East Coast but are doing virtual-learning locally so I have some great runners that are helping me and that's been amazing."

In the end, it's the commitment, focus and drive for all of the cross country athletes that most stands out to Hutson: "The one thing that has kept us showing up day in and day out since July is the will and spirit of these athletes. It is so overwhelming and cool. It's been particularly unfair for the seniors that have worked for four years to get to this place. Despite all the issues that everyone has been dealing with, and not to be able to compete and get the recognition they deserve, they still show up ready to work."

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