

Did You Run?

By: Brendan Minihan Jr.

Well, Louisiana runners, here we are, one week before the State meet, and the main question on everyone's mind should be: did I do everything I could to prepare for this? Did I run the extra mile? Did I eat the healthy diet? Did I get enough sleep? Did I make running my lifestyle? Only you, the individual, know the answer right now. The rest of us will know soon enough. Small schools, minus 2A, square off on Monday, November 17th and large schools and 2A do it on Tuesday. It will be one to go down in the annals of history as hotly contested battles play out on the campus of NSU. Let's hope, at least. That's why I'm in this business anyway – the battles. The constant preparation – run, recover, run, recover, race. That's been life for me for 25 years and I don't foresee it changing anytime soon. Frankly, I don't know how anyone could live without it. Why would you give it up? But, that's a whole other article, and what you want to do right now is focus on State in '08.

This was a great season, wasn't it? I have to say that the moment I remember first feeling the magic this season was at the Catholic Invitational. There's something about the atmosphere at Highland Park that always gets me – the size of the field, the spectators, the spectator friendly course, the hills we aren't accustomed to in flood-plane Louisiana. The atmosphere is infectious. Everyone gets excited. I got so worked up during the boys' varsity race, that I found myself sprinting to catch up to my lead boys so I could yell at them to sprint – I know, it seems pointless, or at least irrational for a grown man to scream his lungs to do something his runners were going to do anyway. Trust me; it just makes coaches feel better to yell, "Sprint! Kick it in!" My problem was, I wasn't looking where I was going as I sprinted along, screaming like a banshee, so I fell right into that little ditch. I was okay. It was the shallow part of the ditch and not wet. Did it stop me from screaming? I didn't skip a beat. Clawing my way out of the ditch with appalled onlookers standing by trying to help me out, I continued to scream, "Sprint! Sprint! Only 200 yards to go!!!"

That's what cross country is all about though. I have as many battle scars from the meets as my runners – actual scars on my legs from thorns in the woods in Fort Buhlow Park in Alexandria... a strained hamstring from the speed reps I was doing in Hammond to get from the mile mark to the two mile and back to the finish... sore quads from showing my runners how to do correct two-legged squat jumps.

Louisiana running is getting better. We're raising the level of our sport to its rightful notch in the sports world. There is more integrity in the sport now. Ever since we finally allowed girls to run three miles, girls have gotten stronger and faster. Not only that, but I would bet a lot of guys got faster too because they realized we have girls (plural) running under 18 minutes now for three miles. Soon, we won't look at Malia and think she is an anomaly (although, we'll always regard her as extraordinary for what she has done). Heck, people still talk about what Keriann did to that Highland course way back when girls were not allowed to run three. What was myth and never acknowledged

on Dyestat is legend now. All it takes is one boy like that to get a wave of boys under 15:10. Notice how many boys are running sub-16 these days? It's infectious.

You know what else is great for our sport? More Louisiana teams are traveling. I'm not just talking about south LA schools crossing I-12 or north LA schools coming down I-49. Louisiana schools traveled out of state more this year than in recent history. Schools perennially go to Mobile for the Meet of Champions or to Chile Pepper in Fayetteville. This year, two schools went to Pensacola for the Gulf Coast Stampede. Several schools went to Mississippi, Texas, and Arkansas for meets. Several more teams have discovered the Twilight Classic and the Frank Horton meets in Memphis, TN. And more kids are planning post-season trips to Foot Locker South or Nike South. It's exciting.

Cross Country in Louisiana is growing up, which follows a national trend. The National Federation of State High School Associations reported, for the 19th consecutive year, an increase in participation in high school athletics.¹ Cross Country ranked third for girls and fourth for boys among sports that gained the most participants. Overall, Cross Country ranks sixth most popular sport for the girls and seventh for the boys. Numbers in Louisiana are growing. Over five thousand athletes, boys (2,100) and girls (3,100) compete in high school cross country. Compared to football (4,000) and volleyball (2,000), our sport is gaining loyalty and improving our image.

Cross Country coaching in Louisiana is getting better, more sophisticated, more nuanced, and more individualized. Thanks to the Louisiana Track and Field Coaches Association, we have better resources for coaches to educate themselves and communicate with each other. Thanks to the Louisiana Milesplit site, we have better dissemination of data – races and race results, athletes communicating and sharing information, coaches communicating more and encouraging teams to get out of their normal routine and travel to more away meets. When I was growing up...well, for one, we didn't have public access to the internet. Coverage of high school running in local papers was just as poor as it is now. I had no clue what competition I would face when I showed up at State. I had no idea how my times stacked up or if I had a chance to win or even place in the top ten. Most teams ran the same few local courses over and over until it was time to travel to either Baton Rouge or Natchitoches, back when State venues alternated. I like to think coaches now appreciate the value in traveling more – getting their teams outside of their hometown to experience a different course and face different competition. If there are programs stuck in their traditional routine, I'd say get out of it and let kids experience the positive buzz of cross country across the nation.

This is all fine and dandy that our sport is improving in many ways, and I hope it will continue in this vein next season, but what it comes down to now is the one race. The only race you should be thinking about now. Your one race. Maybe you are a number one or a number seven. Whatever you are, it's your race. Maybe you are that alternate girl or the JV guy who didn't quite make it this year. Do you get it now? After a long season of miles and repeats and tempo runs, sore legs, chaffing, dehydration, early morning Sunday long runs, dry heaves at the end of a race. Do you get that it is all worth

¹ http://www.nfhs.org/web/2008/09/high_school_sports_participation.aspx

it? If you're not running this coming Monday or Tuesday, what are you going to do to make sure you are running a year from now? If you are racing next week, are you ready to step on the line and really race? John Trautmann, Olympian and former national 5000m champion, is quoted as saying, "Everyone in life is looking for a certain rush. Racing is where I get mine." This is your rush now. This is the best part and the most nerve-wracking part, for sure, of the season. You get to toe the line and find out what you are really made of. Jack Lovelock, former 1500m world record holder, captures the ecstasy and fear of the championship race in his quote: "Big occasions and races which have been eagerly anticipated almost to the point of dread are where great deeds can be accomplished." I will leave it at that.

Good luck to you all. Of course, if you did your work, you won't need the luck. I always tell younger runners that the best race strategy I have is that I know that I am ready to race. I step on the line knowing that I have worked as hard as I could. When I have that confidence, I feel invincible. And it is a rush.

So... are you ready?