

LARGE SCHOOL STATE MEET PREVIEW

High School athletics is predicated on healthy competition. For those drowning in the jargon of high school Power Rankings and media-induced BCS comas, and desperately salivating for pure and simple competition, look no further than your local cross country course. To date, the 2008 Louisiana Cross Country season has offered 10 weekly doses of wholesome, fierce competition.

In Large School action, the competition on both the boys and girls sides has hungrily crowded around the summit for a chance at the ultimate prize – the State Title. At press time, three different teams on the boy's side have enjoyed a stay atop the LTFCA Cross Country poll while as many as three girl's teams have spent time ranked #1 as well. While polls mean little but on paper, these diverse tallies reflect both the opinions of experienced coaches as well as the ever-changing results raced by high school cross country harriers across Louisiana. Below we offer a preview of what's to come in Natchitoches at the end of November. A caveat: As high school runners have proven year after year, young men and women will accomplish extraordinary feats of which only few knew them to be capable. Humbly, I offer merely a glimpse of what to expect based upon what has taken place over the last few months. As always, we fully expect surprises along the way. The preview:

The fight for the **Boy's 5A** State Championship is as wide-open as any state title race in recent memory. Catholic of Baton Rouge, Brother Martin, and Walker have all taken turns as the #1 ranked team in the state, while each school, along with Jesuit, has won a prestigious meet this season. While these four teams harbor aspirations of claiming the state championship, St. Paul-Covington, Lafayette, Fontainebleau, and perennial contender Ruston figure to be in the hunt for the team title as well. Glossing over recent results provides a perspective of what the State Meet might provide. This season has seen Catholic defeat Martin by one point at St. Joes; Martin claim a victory by virtue of a tie over Jesuit at Catholic; Jesuit defeat Brother Martin at Jack Schommer; and Walker defeat all comers at the Episcopal Roundtable Run. Anticipate the fight for the individual title to be just as tight as local harriers from Brother Martin and Jesuit as well as individuals from Catholic, St. Thomas More and Walker have all claimed individual titles at various invitational throughout the season.

So spirited have the competitions been in **5A girl's** action that defending state champion Mt. Carmel has yet to win an invitational despite returning every scoring member of its 2007 state champion squad. Battling through a host of injuries and illnesses, the Cubs of Mt. Carmel appear to be rounding into form at just the right time after posting an impressive 2nd behind St. Joseph's at the Brother Martin Invitational in early November. Injury and illness aside, Mt. Carmel's biggest foes have manifest themselves in the form of Lions (Lafayette), Doves (Academy of Our Lady, St. Scholastica), Debs (Dominican), and Redstickers (SJA). The story of 5A however, has been the rapid improvement of squads such as Dominican and St. Scholastica within the past year. With mere points separating Lafayette, SJA, SSA, MCA, and Dominican all season, the girls' competition promises to be among the most exciting races in Natchitoches November 18. In a mirror image of the 5A boys races, these elite girls teams - featuring impenetrable pack-running from 1 through 7 - have swapped victories at invitationals from Baton Rouge to Hammond and New Orleans all season long. Mt. Carmel, Dominican, Mandeville, Fontainebleau St. Joe's and Academy of Our Lady boast a runner or two capable of winning the individual state title.

In **4A Girls**, the hard-charging Cabrini Crescents are priming for a showdown with St. Michael's of Baton Rouge for the Girls Team title. Both teams have traded weeks ranked as the top team in the classification. Cabrini, 3rd at last season's state championship, will rely on its pack-running to carry it to a State Championship. Defending champion and perennial favorite St. Michael's will pin its title hopes on the bib of its patented front-running tactics. The individual title, much as the team title, may very well come from one of these squads. Belle Chasse and Vandebilt Catholic, who finished 6th and 7th last season respectively, prepare for the State Meet looking to improve its finishes from a year ago.

On the **Boy's side, 4A** schools Holy Cross and Shaw will toe the line with runners vying for the individual title. These key runners hope to improve their respective team's standings from a year ago. The Tigers of Holy Cross look to stifle St. Michael's impressive string of State Title defenses. The squad's realistic prospects of an individual champion, coupled with the return of the bulk of its Top 7 from last season's 4th place finish, add to its threat of running with the best in 4A, as evidenced in its Runner-up finish at the STA-Rollette Invitational October 22. Likewise, the Shaw Eagles look to improve upon its 7th place finish from a year ago with an opportunity at racing to an individual championship. While St. Michael will likely enter the meet as the heavy favorite, runners from Holy Cross, Shaw and Vandebilt Catholic will clamor for spots in the Top 10 in hopes of elevating their team's performance. Vandebilt narrowly edged Holy Cross for 3rd place last season, so expect yet another spirited race in this year's competition. 2007 Runner-up Beau Chene and Parkway – 5th in last year's meet – add to the intrigue of this potential nail-biter. The individual race, with runners from each of the top teams embracing hopes of claiming the title, will be one of the most competitive races of the afternoon.

The 3A boy's race features a re-match of last season's epic battle between defending champion E.D. White, runner-up West Feliciana and third place Jewel Sumner. St. Louis also looks to compete for the team title while Ben Franklin is the lone school representing the New Orleans area. The race for the individual championship promises to be just as enticing as the team race with E.D. White, Sumner, Parkview Baptist, Redemptorist, and West Feliciana highlighting a few of the teams with runners capable of claiming the podium's top spot.

Local teams Academy of the Sacred Heart, Ursuline, Ben Franklin and Xavier Prep headline the **Girl's 3A** action. Sacred Heart, the top-ranked 3A school in the state and #7 overall in the latest LTFCA polls, boasts a squad whose immediate competition starts within its own team. A team very efficient in its pack-running, the Academy will enter the State Championship with an eye on defending its narrow two-point victory over St. Louis in last year's meet. Forecasting their top runner from week to week is anyone's best guess, and whoever runs first for ASH-N.O. on November 18 may claim the individual title at the State Meet. Ursuline Academy hopes to improve upon its 2007 State Meet and crack the Top 5 after finishing just three points behind 5th place Kaplan. Meanwhile, Ben Franklin (10th in 2007) and Xavier Prep (15th in 2007) bring improved squads that look to run their best race of the season in Natchitoches. Along with Sacred Heart, Sumner, St. Louis and E.D. White always save their finest race for the State Meet, so expect a great race for the top 3 spots in this classification.

If you are one of those fans who tunes in just as the clocks turn back, leaves grow brown, and air turns crisp, you've missed out on some excellent racing this cross country season. But fret not; the best is yet to come.

STA Invite <i>Hammond</i>	Schommer Invitational <i>City Park</i>	Walker Shootout <i>Walker</i>	Catholic Invite <i>Highland</i>	St. Joe Invite <i>Highland</i>	Episcopal Roundtable <i>Highland</i>	Holy Cross Invitational <i>City Park</i>	Mt. Carmel Invitational <i>City Park</i>
Malia Cali (STA)	Elizabeth Manuel (Mandeville)	Angela Laborde (SSA)	Elizabeth Manuel	Angela Laborde	Elizabeth Manuel	Angela Laborde (SSA)	Angela Laborde
Cody Trout (Sumner)	Matt Pieri (BM)	Philip Primeaux (CHS)	Philip Primeaux	Philip Primeaux	Paul Arthur (Walker)	Taylor Bacques (Jesuit)	Kyle Lessig (Shaw)