

State in '08

A preview from an unqualified source

For a couple of weeks before the Louisiana Cross Country Championship every year, my dreams at night fill with races playing out in my mind – mostly my own teams, boys and girls competing in 1A. But I often think about 2A races, as well, bringing back memories from my high school years. Dreams realized. Dreams crushed. Records broken. Upsets committed... tie breakers... races coming down to the line... down to the fifth man. Every dream ends with a furious sprint onto the track at NSU, and like a mobius strip, every dream restarts on that long white line in the field facing the baseball backstop.

That is how I view my predictions for this year's small-school championships – as unpredictable and foggy as dreams. Let's face it: most predictions are part bias and part conjecture. We do not have the mainstream media coverage of our sport to give us comprehensive profiles of every team in the state, although it has gotten better. Every year in at least one small school race there is a dark-horse runner or even a dark-horse team that comes out of nowhere and places high. On the other hand, you've got your perennial favorites too, so some predictions are fairly safe. The reality is that most of the top programs will be strong again this year, but the great thing about small school State is that the unknown or the underdog *can* make a tremendous statement on that one day, maybe for only one year. There are no guarantees. Having said that, let's look at the favorites.

Some small-school programs have dominated the podium for years; decades even. Episcopal's boys have been an established force for twenty years in **2A**. There have been occasional scares from teams like University, Sumner (moved up to 3A), Menard, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Newman (who upset them once in 1990). Episcopal is on top again, but University looks very good and in a big meet could pull off the upset. Menard has a great number one to help them to a top finish. The Newman boys have regained their old swagger thanks to a new front-runner who has pulled his teammates along with him, and St. Thomas is not far off their heels. The individual race will be a rematch of last year's one and two, with a Loyola Prep runner and two Episcopal runners trying to crash their party. This is the best 2A boys' field we have seen in a few years, so this race will be interesting.

Girls' 2A has been less of a foregone conclusion this decade, but St. Thomas Aquinas, the defending champs with the best runner in the state, is the team to beat. This will be a fantastic race, too. Episcopal B.R., led by a steady, dependable number one will be ready to rumble. Loyola Prep, with another bold front-runner, will duke it out with an experienced and gutsy team from McGehee. Newman's girls have improved quite a bit and could upset someone. This team race will come down to depth – meaning fourth and fifth runners will determine the outcome. Although the individual title and runner-up (last year's top two) look set in stone, we know anything can happen. Expect a fight for spots two through seven in this race. The top seven could potentially break nineteen minutes on a fast day. Yeah, it's going to be fun to watch.

In **1A**, Hanson and Cedar Creek have both taken titles on the boys' and girls' sides for years, interrupted only intermittently. Rosepine slipped in to win a boys' title in 2004 before moving up to 2A. The race is tight every year, and this year will be no different.

Cedar Creek girls have a tight pack and will be good again, but Hanson looks to end their long win streak, thanks to a powerful one-two punch and a strong three-four-five, plus sixth and seventh runners who could escalate other teams' totals. Merryville, Delcambre, and Metairie Park Country Day are always in the mix on the girls' side, so look for third place to come from them. This year, Ascension Catholic will be among the top teams too. The top three finishers return this year. The champion could be a runner from Christian Life, Hanson, Country Day, or Ouachita Christian. Five girls are coming in having run mid-19s this season, and several more could break twenty, so it will be close. Oh, and Hanson will not graduate any of their varsity girls this year or next, so they sit in the catbird seat in 1A.

St. Martin's boys stormed back onto the 1A scene last year, placing runner-up, and they will be the favorite this year, led by their potential individual champion. There is one Hanson runner who won't agree with that assessment – last year's champion - and he will certainly vie for the title himself. Metairie Park Country Day boys, relegated to bridesmaid status three times in the early 2000s, have a strong team this year and will make it a tight race with St. Martin's and Hanson. Cedar Creek and Delcambre, who typically have good teams, look to improve and battle each other. Runners from Logansport, Northlake Christian, Catholic Point Coupee, False River and St. Frederick will race for top twenty places. It's too close to pick an individual winner on the boys' side, but look for the champion to come from Hanson or St. Martin's, with runners from Country Day and Ascension Catholic close behind.

In **Class B**, Choudrant boys have reigned supreme. The last time they did not win State was 2002 (to Weston and ESA), so none of the current varsity runners have any reason to think they will not win again. And it looks like they have the best shot this year, although Lacassine looks good and Anacoco has given them chase for years. ESA, experiencing a rebuilding year, will be in the mix as well. Grace Christian moved up to B last year, and their previous run on C State titles through 2006 should at least leave a trace of championship hunger in them. Two Choudrant boys will race each other for the individual title, unless someone crawls out from under a rock. I believe they are the only boys in B running under 17 minutes.

Episcopal of Acadiana girls boast a five year win streak in **Class B**. They have always been pushed by Choudrant, Bell City, and Sacred Heart Grand Coteau. This year could be the closest yet, and ESA could be toppled. Also, Maurepas is a team on the rise and may catch some teams off guard. There is no telling if there is a girl from Evans, Runnels, Hornbeck or Glenmora ready to challenge for the individual title. The winner would most likely come from ESA or Choudrant, based on results available.

In **Class C boys**, Elizabeth vs. Grace Christian had been the premier showdown this decade, but with GC moving up to B, we could see a new rivalry begin. Holy Rosary, in its inaugural year, looks to make a strong debut. There are years in C when a dark-horse team surprises, like Hackberry last year as runners-up or LA School for the Deaf in the past, or Plainview and Pleasant running close races last year, so this one could be up for grabs. Hackberry could put up another individual champion this year, but Elizabeth has a shot at the indy title too.

In **C girls**, similar to the boys, Elizabeth and Grace Christian had swapped titles in a heated rivalry that took shape in the demise of Pecan Island. Elizabeth took the title in 2007 and 2005, and Grace Christian took the title in 2006 and 2004, but with GC moving up, it has left Elizabeth unchallenged...so far. It's an even year, so bet on Elizabeth. Plainview was runner-up last year, however, so do not count them out, and LA School for the Deaf has placed high in the recent past.

The pitfall in making predictions like this is that they may be completely wrong. Some team or individual may be offended that I have omitted them from consideration. Then again, maybe my omission will give someone that extra fire in his/her bosom to shock the State! Maybe a coach of a good but unknown team will decide to start posting results of their meets, so we all can give them due credit. Again, I'll admit partial ignorance and bias as I present these. The whole reason we hold this championship is because pundits like me, no matter how experienced and informed we are, never know exactly how races will play out. Actions speak louder than words. Let the kids race.

The reason for making predictions? Well, it's just fun. I figure if I can't sleep at night with all these foggy, anxious dreams in my head that I might as well share them with everyone. Everyone should be excited about this year's State Championship. If you cannot get out there on November 17th or the large-school races on the 18th, you are going to miss a great day for our sport.