



It's a Cross Country Thing Focus on Saints Fall Track Season

by John White (Parent '11, '13)

Every sport has its own soundtrack.

Football goes: HUT!-snap-whomp-crunch-step-step-fade-pass-catch-hit-skid-whistle.

Baseball goes: windup-ffffp-crack-run-run-run-run-tag-run-run-run-slide-SAFE!

Volleyball goes: bounce-bounce-toss-smack-whoosh-bump-lob-set-lob-spike-bounce-YES!-lowfives.

Basketball goes: pass-bounce-dribble-dribble-stop-squeak-pass-dribble-squeak-pass-dribble-jump-air-swish-ROAR!

Have you ever heard the soundtrack of a cross country meet? Cross country goes: ready-set-bang-run-up-run-run-down-run-run-run-upagain-run-run-run-run-run-downagain-COME-ON-TOM!-FASTER-JASON!-YOU-CAN-BREAK-18-MINUTES!-RUN-HARD-ALEX!-HE'S-RIGHT-BEHIND-YOU-CATCHING-UP!-HURRY-IN!-RUN-HARD!-thump-thump-thump-pant-gasp-pant-gasp-stretch. And that's just the runners' soundtrack.

The Coach and the Rules

Coach Jerry Downey handicaps the season ahead: "In terms of senior depth, this is a good year. We've got 14 seniors out here, of varying speeds and talents, about seven juniors – I'd like more depth there so I can groom them for next year – about nine sophomores and 12-15 freshmen."

The cross country season comprises both league and team meets. The course for league meets is three miles, and the grueling course for CIF meets is 5K, including two runs up the Upas Street hill adjacent to Balboa Park's Morley Field area.

Everybody practices, but not everybody runs in every meet. Coach Downey, who ran cross country in high school in the 1950s and has been coaching for over 30 years, has put rules in place for eligibility: "First, if you've been injured or been sick, you don't run in the meet, but barring that, once you've had ten full practices, you're eligible to run. Second, if you miss practice unexcused, you have to sit out the meet. Third, only seven men may participate in the CIF meets from varsity and JV, and they settle that among themselves by running races. We don't vote on it, and popularity doesn't matter; it's who's working hardest and running fastest in practice."

European Roots and Waffle Irons

In the U.S., cross country in the 1950s was like soccer in the 1970s and lacrosse now: it was just catching on. European cross country had long included boulders, hedges and streams in its courses, and the sport began to influence U.S. runners. Colleges had cross country season, but in high school the sport was more like a 5K or 10K adjunct to track and field. There was a big fitness craze in the 1950s and 1960s, with doctors saying that running, jogging and aerobic exercise were good for you. At the University of Oregon, coaches like Bill Bowerman and record-smashers like Bill Dellinger put the sport on the map. In fact, when Bowerman decided that his team needed better footwear, he went beyond coaching to experiment with pouring rubber onto Mrs. Bowerman's waffle iron to make bet-

ter soles for his athlete's sneakers. He and runner Phil Knight turned the experiment into the company we now know as Nike.

"We're always glad to have more kids come out," Coach Downey continues. "For ages, I've been telling boys why cross country is different from almost every other sport: It's simply a matter of who works the hardest. Talent helps, but here at the high school level, if you're willing to come and work, you will be successful in this sport. If you can run the course, you're part of the team."

"The other thing I've realized about cross country time and again is that it attracts and develops great students."

Eating their own dog food

Coach Jason Alcoser is assisting Coach Downey this season, and he runs with the team at practices.

"I think it's important to be out there running among the boys," says Coach Alcoser, "especially for the ones who are still getting used to the course and to cross country in general. Sure, that means that the coaching staff is eating its own dog food, but it gives the new guys more self-confidence and it gives the others a challenge to beat me." Fitness has always been a big part of Coach Alcoser's life. He played football, baseball and soccer in school, and has chaired P.E. at Saints for the last ten years. He prides himself on a 5:12 time in the P.E. mile (twice around the perimeter of the campus – 1400-1500 meters) about five years ago.

"My role is to work with the underclassmen on the team. I spend a lot of time in class and in P.E. with them, so I know most of them. Also, now that Coach Downey has retired from teaching, I help with on-campus organization for cross country. Last year I moved from coaching football and baseball to assisting with track, and I plan to help coach track again next season."

Even the Fans Participate

In every other sport, fans sit in one place and watch the game. The novel fan-experience in cross country is that fans move around the course to cheer the team on: from the starting line to the pool building, across the street to the hill, back to the finish line. Fans chat, laugh, eat, cheer, text and schmooze as in any other sport, except they do it peripatetically, strolling from one point on the course to another.

And what a course! The home course of the Saints cross country team is Morley Field, with a splendid view of Balboa Park, San Diego Bay and the Coronado Bridge. Both the national high school championship and the Foot Locker Cross Country National Championship for adults take place on this same certified, national-level course. It's challenging for the runners and leisurely for the fans.

Mrs. Winnie Arnn, one of the most steadfast of cross country fans at Saints, explains her own enthusiasm: "I enjoy cross country because it's a pure sport; a man and his shoes and a course to be conquered. Fancy equipment or special suits will not help; only heart and grit help. The fans cheer for every runner from every team, and shout encouragement even to the last kid straggling across the line."

Check the school calendar at www.sahs.org and search for "cross country" to see the 2010 schedule. Come for the soundtrack, stay for the view and the action!



Saints Scene

Your monthly report
on the St. Augustine
High School Experience

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