

CONNECTICUT RUNNERS MAKE THE BEST OF THE FOOTLOCKER EXPERIENCE

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Athletes can often train year round aiming towards a single major championship. Unfortunately, variables such as illness or injury can strike at any time, wiping out weeks, months, or even years of hard work and reducing even the fittest of athlete to someone who can barely move off the couch. So when Griswold High School senior Gavin Coombs woke last Thursday morning with a sore throat, he began to think the worst. And when his flu-like symptoms didn't improve, Coombs boarded a plane for San Diego and a much-earned trip to the Footlocker National High School Cross-Country Championships at Balboa Park in San Diego still hopeful that he would be able to be on the starting line Saturday morning to compete against the best high school runners in the nation. Disappointingly, the flu would get the best of Coombs. "I made the decision not to run on Saturday morning," said Coombs of his last minute scratch from a race he had been gearing towards all season long. "I didn't get to experience everything, but the trip was a lot of fun and it was good to hang out with the other East Coast runners".

Coombs had been at the top of his game all year long. His 3rd place finish in the East Regional Footlocker Qualifier race in Van Courtland Park earned him a place in the national finals in San Diego. Since the inception of the championship format in 1979, only 14 runners from Connecticut (7 boys and 7 girls) have accomplished that feat. His senior season resume included wins at the Windham and Wickham Invitationals, an ECC, State Class, and State Open Championship, and his second top 3 finish at New Englands. With those credentials, any finish at Footlocker would have been icing on the cake. And Coombs racing days are far from over. He will follow in his sister Megan's footsteps and attend North Carolina State next fall. "Megan going there was definitely a factor," said Coombs of his college decision. "They were one of the few schools that recruited me consistently over the summer." Their Wolfpack's program should be a good fit for Coombs, who feels the transition from Coach Gerry Chester's training at Griswold to NC State's training philosophy will be manageable. "They do a lot of volume; more than I've run in high school, but the training is very similar." Coombs will also compete in the high school mile at the Millrose Games in Madison Square Garden and at the New Balance Games in Boston. Both are prestigious races where he will get a chance to again measure himself against some of the best competition in the country. Given his consistent improvement, solid work ethic, and natural miler's speed, it's a good bet that Gavin Coombs will have an outstanding collegiate career ahead of him.

Other Footlocker Notes

Congratulations should go out to a number of Connecticut high school harriers for strong post-season performances. Conard (West Hartford) senior Ahmed Haji, a 2-time New England XC Champion, finished 8th in the East Regional to also make the Footlocker cut for the second consecutive year, with the top 8 runners from each of the four regions earning All-America honors and the right to compete in San Diego. Maine's Ben True, who finished one seconds back of Haji in the New England race, held off Massachusetts Victor Gras to win the race, with a mere 8 seconds separating the top 8 finishers. Ledyard's Dave Holliday (72nd), East Lyme's Matt Warren (92nd), Griswold's Tradelle Ward (120th), and Woodstock's Kevin Graham (162nd) were the top area finishers. Fitch senior Betsy Boucher finished 119th in the girl's race.

Haji joined Coombs on the West Coast trip, and posted a solid 21st place effort in the 32 person field. Last season, Haji finished 7th in the Regional, only to run an outstanding race in the Final to finish 8th overall. This year's Footlocker race was competitive from the opening gun, as Galen Rupp of Oregon (coached by Alberto Salazar) forced the pace early and battled with Shadrack Kiptoo of New Mexico from start to finish. Both runners, however, were run down by Illinois and Midwest regional winner Matt Withrow in the final 300 meters. Rupp held off Kiptoo by 1 second for 3rd. East Regional Champ Ben True of Maine posted a strong 5th place finish. In the girl's race, Nevada freshman Marie Lawrence led late in the race before being outkicked by Katelyn Kaltenbach of Colorado for the win.

More from Manchester

More feedback from some of the area's veteran runners on what the Manchester Road Race is part of their Thanksgiving tradition: Former Fitch High School standout Amby Burfoot, the 1968 Boston Marathon winner, Executive Editor of Runner's World Magazine, and owner of a record 9 Manchester victories between 1968-1977, completed his 41st consecutive Manchester race. "There's a lot of history here," commented Burfoot, whose goal of breaking Charlie Robbins streak of 51 straight is in his radar. "This race has always had the tremendous support of the entire community. Even when there were 200 runners competing, it was always the Boston Marathon in the spring and Manchester in the fall that were the most important races on my schedule". Burfoot finished in a very respectable time of 32:15. Way Hedding, 54 and John Brown, 45 again donned their Blues Brothers outfits for Manchester. "We've often been imitated but never equaled," proclaimed Hedding as he enjoyed a post race beer in the Army-Navy Club. "The reason we run as the Blues Brothers every year is because we're blood brothers at heart," explained Brown. "Those two have been around this race more often than clothes in a Maytag dryer," commented Uncasville's Kevin Gallerani, who ran his 25th consecutive race. Too bad the Blues Brothers' suits haven't seen a Maytag washer in all those years. Clem McGrath, a former State Open XC Champion, plans on racing Manchester at least through 2006 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his first Manchester race in 1956, where he finished 16th to earn top high school honors. "Thanksgiving turkey wouldn't taste the same without running Manchester first", said McGrath. This year's race had 10,879 entries (accepting no race day entries for the first time) and 9,978 official finishers. If your holiday schedule permits, make the Manchester Road Race part of your Thanksgiving tradition in 2004.

Racing Roundup

NCAA Cross-Country action came to a conclusion last month. Colorado sophomore Dathan Ritzenhein outdistanced Stanford junior Ryan Hall to win the men's race, while Marblehead, MA native Shalane Flanagan of North Carolina successfully defending her NCAA title in the women's race. The Stanford men dominated their race, posting a 2-3-4-5-10 finish to easily outdistance runner-up Wisconsin (174). Stanford, lead by Sara Bei's 3rd place finish, also claimed the women's team title by 8 points over Brigham Young. Local standouts that competed included Danbury's Andre Laboy at St. Joseph's (76th), Yale's Lucas Meyer (102nd), and former E.O. Smith standout Hunter Spencer at Kentucky (144th). Killingly's Meghan Owen finished 170th overall as a freshman at North Carolina.....Former world marathon record holder Khalid Khannouchi has announced that he will not be competing in the 2004 US Men's Olympic Marathon Trials in February due to recurring foot and knee injuries (medical diagnosis was a chronic tear of the flexor tendon between the first and second metatarsal and a chronic inflammation around the tendon caused by repeated trauma, as well as chondromalacia and a chronic inflammation of the Patella tendon. The cause of both injuries was listed as "repeated trauma". Injuries also derailed Khannouchi's 2000 Olympic hopes.

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