

# SHARPLES, MCGRATH RIVALRY HAS MELLOWED

By DON SIKORSKI  
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At a friend's backyard barbeque a few weeks ago, I glanced over the crowd and witnessed something unusual. Norwich Free Academy Cross-Country Coach Gene McGrath and East Lyme High School Cross-Country Coach Doug Sharples were having a friendly conversation.....with each other.....for no reason. Having participated in the McGrath-Sharples battles back in the day, I looked down at my beer bottle and began to wonder just how many I had consumed, since what I was seeing clearly wasn't right. After all, Jimmy Calhoun and Jim Boeheim might be entering the Hall of Fame together, but they aren't having dinner and cocktails together like old pals. So why after so many hard-fought battles on the high school scene were these two coaches suddenly getting along so well?

A deeper look at history might indicate why a rivalry exists between the two coaches in the first place. As a high schooler, McGrath ran second man on NFA's 1956 State Open championship team. Ten years later, McGrath would become NFA's head cross-country coach, a position he would keep until stepping down after the 1984 season. A young freshman named Doug Sharples also ran on that same 1956 NFA championship team. His idol was his state champion senior teammate Clem McGrath, Gene's older brother. After a brief stint at Kelly Junior High School at coaching football for one season, Sharples took over as head cross-country coach at St. Bernard High School in 1968. In an effort to build the program, Sharples immediately looked to McGrath's NFA team as a target. "My philosophy has always been that if you're going to be the best, you have to face the best," said Sharples. "And NFA was great. They had (two time New England champion) Jim Euell; but we countered with Mark Connolly, and it turned into a rivalry pretty quickly". St. Bernard, led by Connolly, claimed the State Open championship that 1968 season. NFA bounced back to defeat St. Bernard in a dual meet the following season, but the Saints returned the favor and got the best of NFA in the State Open again that November, claiming their second consecutive state championship. "That kinda solidified things as a rivalry," remarked Sharples of those early battles. Two years later, McGrath's '71 team, with top 5 scorers Alden Miner, Paul Hill, Jim Olsen, Andy Coco, and Bob Sirpenski, claimed both the Class "LL" and the State Open titles that season. The stage had been set, with two of Connecticut's best team's located just miles down the road from one another and coached by former high school teammates. "The rivalry was very intense in those days," recalls McGrath of the early rivalry that developed between Norwich and St. Bernard. "As an upperclassman, I looked down on him because he was younger. Then, years later, he (Doug) shows up on the running scene and suddenly he's beating me. It kinda bothered me," says McGrath fondly of the rivalry with his former teammate. To add more fuel to the fire, McGrath's younger brother Richie passed on NFA to attend St. Bernard, and would go on to score for Sharples' 1969 State Open Championship team. The runner up that year was Norwich, with Richie McGrath essentially being the difference, a story of re-told over beverages at the McGrath family reunions.

Three years ago, both coaches returned to the ECC and the rivalry was renewed. McGrath's return to NFA and sparked a renewed interest in Boys Cross-Country in Norwich. "They needed a coach that cared and I figured I owed it to the program, so I came back," says McGrath of his decision to come out of retirement. Sharples' own retirement from St. Bernard following the 2001 season didn't last long, as East Lyme offered him a position as Cross-Country coach in 2002. Sharples turned around the struggling Vikings program immediately, although he is quick to point out that Norwich still had the upper hand over his East Lyme teams. NFA, with McGrath back at the helm, won handily in Sharples inaugural season at East Lyme. The Wildcats also claimed close dual meet wins both 2003 and 2004, but both races were competitive. Norwich outran East Lyme last years' ECC and State Open meets (finishing 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in the state respectively), but Sharples' team returned a week later to surprise the field, claiming 3<sup>rd</sup> overall at the New England Championships ahead of Norwich. Last week, McGrath's NFA team, rich with upperclassmen and loaded with depth, easily outran Sharples' young Vikings team 15-50 in the team's opening meet of the season, with the Wildcats claiming the top 7 finishers.

It's evident that a mutual respect exists between the two rival coaches for what they have accomplished. McGrath cites both Euell and former national class runner Bill Khron as two of the best he's ever coached. He also credits assistant Coach Chad Johnson for much of his team's current success. "A lot of the credit goes to Chad. The kids really look up to him. He works with the Track team and sends me a lot of good kids each season," says McGrath of the NFA program. The McGrath-Johnson relationship extends beyond recent years, as it was McGrath that returned to NFA as an Assistant Track Coach in 1991 to mentor Johnson, then a junior who would later go on to win a second consecutive State Cross-Country championship and run one of the fastest 3200 meter times in the country (9:01) his senior year.

Sharples tenure at St. Bernard High School lasted for 34 seasons before retiring. That run included 3 State Open Championships (1968-69, 1981), 7 State Class Championships, and 9 state class runner-up finishes. His St. Bernard teams finished top 3 in the state class meets in 27 of his 34 seasons. Sharples was also named to the Connecticut High School Coaches Association Hall of Fame and earned National Cross-Country Coach of the Year in 1987. Besides Connolly, some of Sharples' individual standout runners include Todd Renehan, Chris Hansen, Adrian Pelchat, Bill Gill, Daryl Giard, and Matt Warren. Sharples also expressed admiration for some of the runners that have been through the rival NFA program. "They've had some great runners," claimed Sharples. "Jim Euell, Bill Krohn, Alden Miner, and then Chad (Johnson) and (Chris) Andrew, who both won State Open titles."

Both coaches also admit to differences in their coaching styles. "Doug always had more strategy," explained McGrath. "They would sometimes go out hard to get position based on the course, or they would mark a man to try and run with in order to win the meet. He spent the time doing research. My kids would just go out and try to run their best." But upon returning to the coaching ranks after many years, McGrath found himself with a new philosophy. "I'm adopting a lot of his (Sharples) training methods; the heart rate monitor training and the Jack Daniels training philosophy. Really, I try to encourage the kids to move up to the next level. And I've always relied on the big numbers; getting a lot of kids out for the team. They have been great," explains McGrath. "The kids really work hard".

As far as the rivalry, it appears things have mellowed a bit for these two coaches. "We've been hot competitors for years," explained McGrath of the rivalry. "He (Doug) is a very competitive guy. I used to be, although I think I've mellowed out," joked McGrath. As far as his recent bonding with Coach Sharples, McGrath cited respect for his former high school teammate. "You have to respect the guy for what he's accomplished. They have 3 State Open Championships. But I enjoy what the rivalry has become. I think we have a mutual respect for each other. It's always intense during the race, but now when it's all over, we can get together and have a beer".

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