

# CROSS-COUNTRY'S INSPIRATION IN THE AIR

By DON SIKORSKI  
*Special to the Bulletin*

Before Bill Rodgers strung together four Boston and four New York City Marathon wins, he posted what is arguably a superior distance running performance with his 3<sup>rd</sup> place finish in Morocco at the 1975 World Cross-Country Championships. It was those years of toiling over the grass, dirt, and hills of Boston's Franklin Park and other off-road venues that developed Rodgers' superior cardiovascular strength he would later call upon midway through the climb up Heartbreak Hill during the final kilometers of the Boston Marathon. Alberto Salazar followed in Steve Prefontaine's footsteps at the University of Oregon, going toe to toe with a number of Kenyan runners who were the first to attend school here in the States. Prefontaine himself was a three-time NCAA Cross-Country champion before setting every American record from 2,000 to 10,000 meters on the track. Lynn Jennings at Princeton, Bob Kennedy at Indiana, John A. "The Elder" Kelly at Arlington High in Massachusetts, John J. "The Younger" Kelly at New London, Amby Burfoot at Fitch, the list goes on and on. These are just some of the runners who were introduced to the sport of distance running through high school cross-country before going on to standout careers and performances on the roads or the track.

A New England fall means cooler temperatures, darker evenings, football, fall foliage, and cross-country running. Runners looking for one last shot of inspiration to carry them through to year-end should consider taking in an old fashioned cross-country race, either as a spectator or as a participant. Cross-country running represents youth; a throwback to the days of our childhood, where we run and race not for time over a precision-measured oval or asphalt loop, but run and race in an attempt to outrun our competition over the unmeasured, hilly, grassy, terrain. It's becomes OK to play in the mud and rain again, and a little pushing and shoving or an elbow or two used to gain position was always acceptable just as long as no one got hurt.

Van Cortlandt Park, probably the country's best-known cross-country racing venue, is a dreary, open field of chewed up grass and dirt horse trails in the Bronx when vacant. Add 300 runners wearing a variety of school colors and suddenly the park radiates of athletic inspiration. Tactics and strategies are key factors in cross-country racing; to be the hunter or the hunted sometimes makes all the difference at the finish line. And spectators have opportunities to view runners up close and at multiple checkpoints during the race, depending on the course layout. I remember getting to the one-mile mark in Boston's Franklin Park during the 1985 US Cross-Country Championships as Pat Porter, an 8-time national champion from Colorado, churned through the split in a jaw dropping 4:12. Only one other runner remained in striking distance at that point, quite remarkable considering the national-class caliber of the chase pack. After winning, Porter later claimed that his strategy was to drop the hammer down at that point "to see who was really willing to hurt". The problem was, the rest of the field was already hurting, and there were six challenging miles to go. My own personal memories of cross-country competition range from the thrill of being part of state championship, undefeated high school teams to the disappointment of lost championships and failed NCAA team qualifying bids to the exhaustion of lifting muddy spikes step after step up the grueling Franklin Park hills years later. Cross-country racing, if done properly, will hurt bad and challenge your tenacity in an almost spiritual sort of way. Breaking through to the other side of that pain threshold is the key to success in cross-country.

There are dozens of local and regional cross-country events this fall. Try and make an effort to take in a cross-country race this year. You may just begin to feel like a kid again.

- Saturday, October 6<sup>th</sup> – Wickham Park High School XC Invitational – Wickham Park, Manchester, CT
- Friday, October 12<sup>th</sup> – New England Collegiate Championships – Franklin Park, Boston, MA (617) 566-7600
- Saturday, October 13<sup>th</sup> – Stenger Farm USATF 5K Cross-Country Race (Open) – Waterford, CT (860) 439-0222
- Thursday, October 18<sup>th</sup> – ECC Cross-Country Championships – Norwich Golf Course, Norwich, CT
- Friday, October 26<sup>th</sup> – NCAA Big East Conference Championships – Van Cortlandt Park, New York
- Saturday, October 27<sup>th</sup> – CIAC State Class XC Championships – Wickham Park, Manchester, CT
- Sunday, October 28<sup>th</sup> – Mayor's Cup Cross-Country Races (Open) – Franklin Park, Boston, MA (617) 566-7600
- Friday, November 2<sup>nd</sup> – Connecticut Cross-Country State Open Championship – Wickham Park, Manchester, CT
- Saturday, November 10<sup>th</sup> – NCAA Division I XC Qualifier – Franklin Park, Boston, MA
- Sunday, November 11<sup>th</sup> – USATF-New England Championships (Open) – Franklin Park, Boston, MA (61) 566-7600
- Sunday, November 18<sup>th</sup> – Connecticut USATF Championships – West Hartford, CT (203) 574-3310
- Saturday, November 24<sup>th</sup> – Footlocker High School East Qualifier – Van Cortlandt Park, New York (212) 720-3752

## **This month in history**

September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1987 – New Britain, CT's Willowbrook Park is the site for the State of Connecticut Inter-collegiate Cross-Country Championships, which features a number of the state's former top high school runners competing for their new programs. In the 8K men's race, Yale's Alan Svensen (25:22) holds off Southern Connecticut's Mark Dillon (25:28) for the individual win, leading his Eli teammates to the team title with 27 points. The race is tightly contested up front, with only a 40-second gap amongst the top 10 finishers. Yale's Jim Gibson is 3<sup>rd</sup> in 25:32, followed by E.O. Smith 2 time state champion Jay O'Keefe of SCSU (4<sup>th</sup> in 25:34). Other familiar names include UConn's future Olympic trials participants Andy Ball (5<sup>th</sup>) and Gary Giffen (11<sup>th</sup>), former Xavier ace Greg Bonaiuto of Yale (6<sup>th</sup>), SCSU's Greg Quint (7<sup>th</sup>) and Kevin Grant (13<sup>th</sup>), Central Connecticut's Kevin Pigeon (14<sup>th</sup>) and twin bother Keith (20<sup>th</sup>), former NFA runners Mike Fusaro (54<sup>th</sup>) and John Jacaruso (68<sup>th</sup>) of UConn, Killingly's Randy White (82<sup>nd</sup>) and Ledyard's Kurt Porta (85<sup>th</sup>). In the team race, Southern Connecticut is 2<sup>nd</sup> with 43 points with the UConn men 3<sup>rd</sup> (78 points). In the women's race, Yale runners post a four-way tie for the individual win as Sarah P. Smith, Susannah Beck, Rebecca Rivkin, and Sarah E. Smith are all clocked at 17:24 over the 5K layout. Top local finishers include UConn's former State Champion Kim Hawkes of Montville (6<sup>th</sup> in 17:54) and younger sister Kelly Hawkes (12<sup>th</sup>). Yale easily claims the team title with 18 points, bettering UConn's 55 point total with SCSU 3<sup>rd</sup> with 79 points. Other schools competing including Wesleyan, New Haven, Hartford, Trinity, Quinnipiac, and Fairfield.

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