

EASTERN CONNECTICUT A HOTBED OF TALENT

By DON SIKORSKI
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Over the past four weeks, the ECC has been hammering the high school cross-country competition. Just how strong is the Eastern Connecticut Conference (ECC) in cross-country? The conference has been continuously churning out some of the state's premiere runners and teams over the past years, making it clearly the most competitive conference in the state. Consider some of the recent statistics: This year's boys ECC Champion John Paul Mandelburg of Norwich Free Academy ran to an impressive 3rd place finish in the State Open behind Steve Muchetti of Ridgefield and Andre LaBoy of Danbury and was only a mere 7 seconds back of Muchetti's winning time over the 5,000 meter layout. Only a junior, Mandelburg will return as the favorite in 2002, hopefully following in the footsteps of NFA's recent state XC champions Chad Johnson (1991 and 1992) and Chris Andrew (1999). In the girls race, Killingly's Meghan Owen, also a Junior, barely broke a sweat in winning her second consecutive state championship by an incredible 37 second margin over 4,000 meters. A week later, Owens' captured the New England XC Championships with a 1-second win over Liz Gesel of Manchester (NH) Central. She is also expected to challenge for All-America honors at the Foot Locker Regionals in New York City, where she earned runner-up honors as a sophomore. More impressively, Owen is the latest link of a chain of Open titles claimed by ECC female runners dating back to Waterford's Liz Mueller (1989-92), NFA's Jill Akus (1993, 1995-96), and Fitch's Jessica Schenk (1997-99). In total, area runners have claimed 12 of the last 13 state titles. East Hartford's Allison Hascomb, who ran a great race to beat Akus in 1994, was the only non-ECC female runner to win the XC State Open in more than a dozen years.

There were a number of great team efforts this year as well. Gerry Chester's Griswold Wolverines, the Class "S" Champions who had pounded on the competition all season long, took dead aim at a State Open title. Chester's team had powerful Danbury in trouble with a half-mile to go when Griswold's fifth runner, Brian Laguerre, collapsed from dehydration and did not score. Griswold posted a score of 135 points and featured four runners in the top 21 positions, but wound up second to defending champion Danbury (113 points). Laguerre showed tremendous guts in crawling to the finish line in 238th place, an incredible effort that was a trademark of the Griswold team all season long. Griswold was lead by ECC Runner up and Class "S" Champion Mike Charron (4th overall) and Gavin Coombs, only a sophomore, in 7th. Coombs is the younger brother of Meghan Coombs, a former Griswold standout now competing for North Carolina State. Behind Griswold, four other area teams had terrific seasons. Ledyard (4th behind Xavier), Fitch (5th), Stonington (9th), and NFA (11th), all posted strong team performances. Fitch, lead by their 1-2 punch of Mark Oliver (8th) and J.P. Gilbert (22nd), tied Charlie Ewers' Ledyard team for a share of the ECC title by winning the conference race. Stonington got a great performance from Sam Agnello (12th), who stepped up all year long to help teammate Mark Brissette (24th) up front. Brissette, the 2000 ECC Champion 3rd in the Open a year ago, was slowed by a foot injury all season long but still managed a 24th place finish overall in this year's Open. In the girls' race, Fitch completed another successful team title defense, outrunning Ridgefield to win 115-144. NFA, lead by Mallory Keegan's 11th place finish, was a strong 7th overall. Griswold's Abbey Sadowski (5th State Open, 8th New England's), Woodstock's Amy Hicks (7th Open, 15th New England's), and Fitch's Betsy Boucher (Class "L" Champion, 9th Open) and Blair Kauffmann (16th) also earned All-State honors.

In total, the ECC had four of it's teams (Griswold Boys, Ledyard Boys, Fitch Boys and Girls) qualify for the New England's, had 14 All-State (Top 25) individuals, and had 8 All-New England individuals (included the girls champion), putting an exclamation point of this year's high school cross-country season. The local running community should be proud of these high school athletes and make every effort to encourage running to be a part of their future for the good of the sport.

Racing Roundup

- At the NESCAC league championships at Bowdoin College on October 27th, Connecticut College's Dave Clayman (14th place) and Maura Danahy (4th place) both earned All-Conference honors in cross-country
- UConn's Dan Wilson won the Big East Cross-Country Championships at Van Cortland Park in New York City. Wilson, a former CT State Open XC champion while at Notre Dame High School, covered the challenging 5 mile course in 24:28 and lead the Huskies to a fifth place team finish
- I guess it's not my place to question the logic of racing two marathons only 16 days apart and then racing 5 ½ miles a week later, especially when Brazilian Luiz Ramos, the runner who did just that, is much faster than I am. He was also pretty successful in those three races. Ramos was 2nd in both the Hartford Marathon on October 13th and at the Mystic Places Marathon on October 28th. At the Tarzan Brown Road Race on November 4th, Ramos hammered out the opening mile in 4:40 and cruised to a victory in 27:42, holding off Michael Morris and 1999 State Open XC runner-up Tyler Cardinal. Canterbury's Chad Johnson was 4th overall and Chadwick Brown, who a day earlier had won the Owens XC Invitational race in Thomaston, claimed the 5th spot. Marie Davenport, the 1998 and 1999 Tarzan Brown winner, was again the first female finisher in 30:31, with Mystic's Martha Merz 2nd in 31:45.
- Danbury's Joe Lemay, who had won the past three Tarzan Brown races, passed on defending his title in favor of competing in the New York City Marathon. Lemay cruised through the halfway mark in 1:07:29 but slowed in the second half to finish 45th place overall in 2:26:01. Mystic's Stanley Mickus was the top local finisher in New York, running 2:57:22 for 506th place. Waterford's Carolyn Verdon ran 3:58:11, while former East Lyme Marathon Race Director Way Hedding reached the finish line in a respectable 4:18:39.
- At the Cape Cod Marathon in Falmouth, MA that same day, Andrew Triak of Stonington (3:05:49) and Amy Blakeslee of Lebanon (3:40:14) posted the fastest area times.
- Pfizer's Mike Graziosi showed that he's back in top form after being slowed by injury this past winter and spring. At the EBAC Fall Challenge race in New London on November 10th, Graziosi took command just after the halfway mark and then fought off strong headwinds to win the 4.75 mile race in 26:27, 12 seconds up on Bobby Clark of EBAC (26:39) and John Murphy (26:40). Martha Merz (27:46) outdueled Kris-Anne Kane (28:06) to claim top female honors. Pfizer also claimed top corporate honors in both the men and women's divisions.

This month in history

November 26th, 1987 – Course record holder John Treacy of Ireland had owned the Highland Street hill at the Thanksgiving Day Manchester Road Race in past years. At the 51st Annual Manchester Race, Treacy's fellow-countryman John Doherty, who has spent two days in bed with the flu earlier in the week, stole the hill from Treacy and then surged past Richard O'Flynn in the final half mile for the win. Doherty hit the tape in 21:31 for the 4.748 mile race to claim his second straight Manchester victory, just 5 ticks of Treacy's 1979 course record. O'Flynn was 2nd in 21:35, while Treacy claimed 3rd in 21:54 to complete the 1-2-3 Irish sweep. Jill Clark of England (25:35) prevailed over Christine Benning (25:53) on the women's side. Top state finishers included Cromwell's Joe Swift (12th - 22:49), Dartmouth Junior Brian Lenihan (17th - 23:05), and Middletown's John Bysiewicz (19th - 23:20). Former East Catholic standout Theresa Kitteridge was the 5th female overall in 27:59. Amby Burfoot, who holds a record nine Manchester victories including seven straight, ran his 25th consecutive Manchester Road Race. The 7,000+ person field was also the most talented ever assembled at Manchester. Said the always confident Keith Brantley, who was the 8th rank road racer in the world at the time: "Geez, I'm the top-rated 10K track man in the country and I finished sixth. But I'll be back. "I'm going to win this race one day." Brantley never did.

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