

JOHNSON'S NOT LOOKING BACK ON SUCCESS

By DON SIKORSKI
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Twenty years from now, Chad Johnson doesn't want to look back on his running career and wonder what might have been. That's why it wasn't uncommon to see him lined up front and center at the starting line of about two dozen races this year to date, willing and ready to compete. And the way Chad Johnson has raced this year, it wasn't that uncommon to also see him front and center at the finish line.

Johnson, a physical education teacher at Lebanon Middle School, just recently completed his first season as head Cross-Country coach at Lyman Memorial High School. As a former NFA Assistant who had been involved with the Wildcat's athletic program ever since he competed for NFA from 1989-1993, Johnson seems to have handled the transition of coaching at a new school quite well. Along with Assistant Coach Shaun Berard, their Lyman teams posted respectable performances in the COC, with the Boy's Team 3rd and the Girls team 4th in their conference. Johnson was eager to take the reins and begin teaching his new runners the attitude and work ethic that go along with a sport like high school cross-country. He did admit, however, that being away from NFA for the first time in about a dozen years was an adjustment. "The biggest difference in going from NFA to Lyman was that I was always around the runners at NFA and I knew all of them personally," Johnson explained, "so I didn't need to earn their respect. But I got some good feedback from the (Lyman) kids this year. They did a real good job all season long. I wanted them to be competitive; not that they all had to be superstars, but that they would all try to do their best. And I wanted them to enjoy their running."

Although Johnson may have felt the need to prove himself to his new team, he is hardly an unknown in the local running community. A distance running prodigy even before he entered high school, Johnson would go on to win back-to-back state cross-country titles for the Wildcats in 1991 and 1992 and as a senior, possessed one of the nation's fastest track times at 3200 meters (9:01). From there, he went on to compete for Coach Greg Roy at the University of Connecticut. Johnson feels, however, that he never reached his full potential as a runner while at Connecticut, and then he spent the next few years running sporadically and racing infrequently and inconsistently. This past year, however, was a completely different story for Johnson. Anxious to give serious running one more attempt, Johnson trained with the purpose of helping his Mohegan Strider teammates win the USATF State Championship and vowed that he would be on the starting line and give it his best shot no matter what level he was running at. Although juggling coaching responsibilities and his own training was a challenge at times, Johnson was not going to fade away from the race scene again. "In the past, whenever I tried to run and coach at the same time, I've completely failed, Johnson admitted. "This time, I did most of the training all year long, and then it only took a few weeks to get my legs back (after the cross-country season)." Johnson certainly proved he was ready to race, finishing 2nd in the USATF circuit for the year behind the Hartford Track Club's Chris Chisholm, while beating Chisholm head-to-head in state championship races at 5 miles, 10 miles, and 20K). Other season highlights included state championship wins at 5 miles (road), 5,000 meters (track), 8K (cross-country), a 3rd place finish in the Rose City Challenge, and a 17th place finish overall in 1:04:40 at the prestigious US National 20K Championships in New Haven on Labor Day.

Many runners who possess top-level running credentials struggle when faced with the concept of not being able to match up with past high school or collegiate performances. Chad Johnson has conquered those demons and has returned to the roads with a refreshing new attitude. "I finally started to figure it out," explains Johnson. "Before, I used to think that if I didn't go out and run 14:47 for 5K, then why bother? But I've reached a point in my life where I have the job I want, I'm married and have a house, and now I can just get out there and enjoy road races. From the early days in the beginning when I would tag along with my Dad to the races with the Mohegan Striders, I did it because it was fun. And I'm having fun now."

Racing Roundup

In a battle of former state XC champions, Chad Johnson (NFA 1991-92) outran Eric Blake (Lyman Memorial 1996) at the USATF 8K XC State Championships in West Hartford. Peter Oviatt of Lebanon was 3rd overall, while Chadwick Brown (4th) and former UConn standout Kevin Jensen (5th) rounded out the top 5 finishers. Heather Gardiner outdistanced Kerry Arsenault for top female honors.....Former Providence College standout Steve Myers cruised to a comfortable win at the Along the Thames 5K in New London on November 17th. Myers, 25, clocked in at 16:21, while Pawcatuck's Carla Thompson returned to the roads after a low key summer of racing to take the ladies title in 18:32.....UConn's Dan Wilson won the NCAA East Regional Qualifier at Franklin Park on November 10th. Wilson, a former Notre Dame (CT) High School standout, ran 29:44 over the 10K course (actually measured at 9,845 meters) for a 1-second win over Providence's Hanish Thorpe. A number of former local high school standouts also ran very well; Yale's Chris Andrew, the 1999 State Open XC Champion while at NFA, finished a strong 24th overall in 30:56, while his former high school rival, Tyler McCabe of Stonington, was 33rd overall in 31:08, helping his Providence Friars to claim the team title with 59 points. Andrew and McCabe are both only sophomores and both continue to get stronger and faster each year. URI's Matt Auger (NFA – 174th place) and Chris Tedeschi (Fitch 218th place) also ran well all season long. UConn finished 14th in the 36 team field.....Kenya's Leonard Murchero won the 65th Annual Manchester Road Race on Thanksgiving Day. Murchero, a world class miler making his 3rd attempt at a Manchester title, ran the 4.748 mile course in 22:40, good enough for a 12 second win over Dan Browne of Boulder, Colorado, a West Point graduate running for the U.S. Army team and currently America's top distance runner from 10K to the half-marathon distance. Canterbury's Chad Johnson was the first Connecticut finisher (21st overall in 23:36), followed closely by Eric Blake in 24th (23:46). Svetlana Zakharova of Russia, who was the 3rd female finisher in the New York City Marathon three weeks earlier, ran 24:22 to edge crowd favorite Amy Rudolph of Warwick, RI by a mere one second for the women's title. Two notable runners in this year's field were American 3,000 and 5,000 meter record holder Bob Kennedy, who was competing in his first road race over 1 mile but had been struggling with a number of injuries and was never a factor, finishing a disappointing 12th overall in 22:54. The other is 81 year-old Charley "Doc" Robbins, a past winner who amazingly finished his 50th consecutive Manchester Road Race in about 58 minutes and change. Over 11,500 runners competed in the annual Thanksgiving Day event.

This month in history

December 11th, 1989 – Doug Kurtis of Northville, Michigan did 12 times what most runners would give almost anything to do even once; run a marathon in under 2 hours and 20 minutes. What made Kurtis' accomplishment even more impressive is the fact that he became the first man to run 12 sub 2:20 marathons in a single calendar year. At the San Diego Marathon, Kurtis broke the 2:20 barrier for the 12th time in 1989 to break the record of Sweden's Kjell-Erik Stahl, who had run 11 sub 2:20 marathons in 1982 at the age of 43. Kurtis, 37, missed number 12 at the Bangkok Marathon two weeks earlier by a mere 15 seconds over the 26.2 mile distance before finally claiming the record in San Diego. In total, Kurtis is second to only Stahl in sub 2:20 marathons with 49 to Stahl's amazing 62. Kurtis also has 20 marathon victories to his credit and a personal best of 2:13:34 from the 1982 New Orleans Marathon. Kurtis would go on to become a top master's marathoner during the nineties but has since retired from competitive distance running.

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