

# ECC COACHES WILL HAVE A NEW LOOK THIS FALL

By **DON SIKORSKI**  
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Area Cross-Country coaches may take a look around at their competition this fall and see some unfamiliar sights. And picture an ECC Championship race with no Gerry Browning, Doug Sharples wearing maroon, and Gene McGrath leading the NFA Wildcats for the first time since 1984. Things have changed in the coaching ranks for the state's premiere cross-country conference.

Browning stepped down as head coach at Fitch High School last spring due to health reasons. It will certainly be different to be at a Fitch meet and not see Browning roaming the sidelines. Over the past years, he had built the Fitch program into one of the state's strongest. His contributions to the school will be certainly be missed. But Fitch won't be the only ECC school with a new coach at the helm. Gene McGrath returns to Norwich Free Academy after a 14+ year absence from coaching. He inherits a strong and deep Wildcats team, led by senior John Paul Mandelburg, 3<sup>rd</sup> in last year's State Open and a legitimate contender to win it all this season. And his ties to the school run even deeper than that. McGrath is a 1958 NFA graduate and was a member of NFA's strong cross-country teams of the mid-50's, including the 1956 State Open championship team, where he ran 2<sup>nd</sup> man behind his older brother Clem, who would claim the individual State Open championship that fall. McGrath's extensive coaching resume at NFA includes 20 years as Head Cross-Country Coach, a Boys Class LL and State Open Championship in 1971, and a Girls Class LL Championship in 1977. After retiring from coaching after the 1987 track season, he also returned to the school as an Assistant Track Coach in 1991 to coach a young distance running prodigy named Chad Johnson. Johnson, a junior at the time, would go on to run one of the fastest 3200 meter times in the country (9:01) and be ranked nationally at the distance in his senior year. Although he has been away from coaching for a long time, McGrath continued to be a loyal supporter of the NFA teams over the past years, and he looks forward to getting back into the sport full time this fall. "It's a good group of kids," explains McGrath. "Of course, if there's any real accomplishments this season, it will be because of the kids. As coaches, we are only the facilitators, and you can't be successful without a good bunch of kids. But it's nice to be back."

Ironically enough, Doug Sharples was also a runner on those strong NFA cross-country teams of years ago, beginning as a young freshman who idolized his state champion senior teammate Clem McGrath. He hasn't been away from coaching, but competing coaches may do a double take when they see him wearing new school colors this fall. That's because Sharples, who has coached at St. Bernard High School for the past 34 seasons, will be the new Cross-Country coach at East Lyme High School this fall. Sharples is enthusiastic about his future at East Lyme, comparing the school's demographics to St. Bernard enrollment of the early '80's. His coaching resume from St. Bernard reads like that of a Dean Smith or Tom Landry. His St. Bernard cross-country teams have posted over 400 career wins, claimed a total of 34 men's and women's state cross-country championships, 10 state track championships, and won 3 State Open Championships (1968-69, 1981). In an incredible measure of consistent excellence, his teams have finished in the top three in the state class meets in 27 of his 34 seasons. Sharples is a member of the Connecticut High School Coaches Association Hall of Fame and was named National Cross-Country Coach of the Year in 1987. He has produced 37 All-State athletes, including 14 state champions. Sharples, like McGrath, is also quick to defer credit for his accomplishments to his athletes. "I owe a debt of gratitude to St. Bernard High School," says Sharples. "I've been very fortunate to have had a tremendous group of athletes who believed in what we were doing, a strong Alumni Association who have supported the team over the years, and parents who were 100% behind the program."

Both coaches are anxious to get started on their cross-country seasons this fall. The Eastern Connecticut Conference has been the strongest in the state for the past few years and is expected to be at that level again this fall. The conference and its athletes are fortunate to have coaches like Gene McGrath and Doug Sharples back again this fall.

## Racing Roundup

- At the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Falmouth Road Race in Cape Cod, Kenyan's James Koskei (32:10) and Lornah Kiplagat (35:13) claimed individual honors. Koskei broke away from fellow countryman and defending Falmouth champion John Korir and marathon world record holder Khalid Khannouchi in the final mile to earn the win, 3 seconds up on Korir. Khannouchi, who is currently preparing for this fall's Chicago Marathon, hung on for 3<sup>rd</sup> in 32:14. Kiplagat erased all doubts early, breaking away from her nearest competitors in the first mile to earn her 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive win at Falmouth, the first to do so since Joan Benoit in 1981-1983.
- Hartford's Gideon Mutisya may be the only person to ever leave Sneekers Café in Groton with more money than he walked in with. That's because Mutisya earned a cool \$100 in cash for his win at the Sneekers 5 Mile Road Race on August 25<sup>th</sup>. Mutisya cruised home in 25:43, comfortably ahead of 2<sup>nd</sup> place finisher Peter Oviatt (27:24). East Hartford's Heather Gardiner (29:51) outdistanced Mystic's Martha Merz (30:05) in the women's race. The Sneekers Race, created as a fundraiser for the March of Dimes, is one of the more popular races in Southeastern Connecticut, thanks to Race Director Pete Volkmar, SNERRO and all the race volunteers, and the people at Sneekers who support the race every year.

## This Month in History

September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1991 – Bob Kempainen of Minnetonka, Minnesota had never raced more than 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) before the New Haven 20K Road Race. He made the transition from Cross-Country (where he had chased down Pat Porter to become the TAC National Champion) and track racing (where he was an All-American at Dartmouth College) look easy, by disposing of his nearest competitors just after the nine mile mark to win in 1:00:17. The cool, 60-degree weather and a relaxed early pace saw a pack of twenty runners together for the first four miles. It wasn't until East Rock Park that Kempainen made his move that the rest of the field couldn't cover. Chris Fox of Hagerstown, Maryland was 16 seconds back in 2<sup>nd</sup> with Driss Dacha of Morocco 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1:00:43. Rodney Ellsworth of Torrington was the top Connecticut finisher (11<sup>th</sup> in 1:02:13), while Kevin Grant of Quaker Hill (13<sup>th</sup> in 1:02:46) claimed top area honors. On the women's side, Michelle Bush-Cake of Berrien Springs, Michigan, who has set an American 20K record two years prior at New Haven, was the top female finisher in 1:09:17 (58<sup>th</sup> overall), outdistancing Jane Wetzel of Forth Collins, Colorado by 10 seconds. Almost 3,000 runners finished the 20K and the accompanying 5K road races, which continue to be a Labor Day tradition in New Haven.

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