

Loaded Junior Bills taking aim at better state finish

By **BRIAN JERAULD**
STAFF WRITER

It's a safe bet that your team is considered a powerhouse when it is disappointed in a seventh-place state finish.

But give St. Louis U. High a break. Last year at the season finale, the team just had a "rough day."

There may have been a bit of concern that SLUH, which was striving for second place in the state in 2004, was about to take a major hit that year to senior graduation - including four of its starters. But, with a team that goes 80 runners deep, coach Jim Linhares wasn't exactly surprised to see that his team is again competitive for the 2005 season.

The surprise came from the fact those 80 runners are being pushed by a couple of freshmen.

With five of the seven varsity slots already taken by top-running seniors, the last two openings are being threatened by a pair of standout freshmen, Cliff David of South County, and David Kuciejczyk-Kernan.

"This is my fifteenth season as assistant coach," said Tom Flanagan, "and I've never seen a freshman make the varsity team. Both of these guys have a shot."

One of them is no surprise. David has been running cross county since the sixth grade, participating with the St. Louis Blazers on a national level on his way to sixth place out of 320 of the nation's best youth runners.

The other one is just a gift from heaven (or, actually, Webster Groves). Kuciejczyk-Kernan, whose teammates understandably refer to as "Cujo" has never hit the radar as

far as running is concerned, merely training alone for the triathlon for the past year. SLUH never saw him coming.

"When I was nine or so, I ran for a year of track with St. Margaret's," Kuciejczyk-Kernan said. "But that was once a week. I never trained too heavily. I always liked running, but I've never tried it competitively."

Together, the freshmen are what Linhares describes as "two of the best we've ever had." In the school's recent two-miler alumni race, which pits the current squad against returning alum for a time trial as well as a few bragging rights, Kuciejczyk-Kernan finished 10th in 10:58 and David was ninth in 10:53. Seventh place was only seven seconds ahead.

Phenoms the freshmen may

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BRIAN JERAULD PHOTO

St. Louis U. High will look to its captains for leadership. Three of the five are, from left, Drew Kaiser, Michael Jonagan and Andy Bonner. Not pictured are Ben Murphy-Baum and Shane Mulligan. Freshmen Cliff David of South County and David Kuciejczyk-Kernan are pushing the seniors for the final two slots.

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be, but the 2005 team is still being led by some tough senior running. Finishing first in the alumni race was SLUH's top runner, Ben Murphy-Baum, who had an outstanding junior year, placing 10th in the cross country state meet and seventh in the 3,200 meters at the state track meet. He also broke the school record in the 3,200, which had stood since 1982.

"Ben is coming back this year, looking to be competitive with the best runners in the state," Linhares said. "It's always exciting to have a guy with that kind of potential."

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Jim Linhares

coach of SLUH's cross country team

Michael Jonagan will also return as a top runner, bringing varsity experience from both his junior and sophomore years. The same can be said for Drew Kaiser. Murphy-Baum, Jonagan and Kaiser all have turned in a two-mile time of under 10 minutes.

Rounding out the five seniors,

all of whom are captains, will be Matt Lawder and Andy Bonner, two of last year's best JV runners. Both runners are pushing the 10-minute mark with their two-mile times, and Lawder comes off a 2004 season of leaps and bounds. His late-season push had him knocking on the varsity door as the eighth best runner for the state meet.