

Junior Billikens top Lee's Summit North

SLUH scores 65 points, 10 better than defending state champions

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. - Outside the clubhouse there was a lot of addition being done.

The individual results for the Class 4 boys state championship cross country meet were posted in the window of the Oak Hills Golf Center clubhouse. Those in St. Louis University High garb who had gathered around were quickly and quietly trying to figure out where the championship trophy was headed. Would it go east with the Junior Billikens or would it ride off into the sunset with Lee's Summit North? No one knew. It was too close to call.

Finally the team results were hung in the window. The SLUH faithful let out a cheer.

Those who had waited for the unveiling immediately raced across the golf course to share the news with the parents, students and runners who had stayed back at the tent.

"We won!" they shouted over and over again as they dashed through a tee box and across the fairway. "We won!"

Saturday, for the fourth time in school history, SLUH was the champion. The Junior Billikens scored a 65, 10 points better than Lee's Summit North and the lowest score in the team's history.

Coach Jim Linhares, among those leading the charge back to the tent, was received with handshakes and hugs all around. With each passing hug, with each slap on the back, it started to overwhelm him. He pulled off his sunglasses and wiped the corners of his eyes. He told the assembled



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Members of the St. Louis University High cross country team celebrate their Class 4 state cross country championship.

mass they should head off to the awards area but he had trouble pushing out the words.

This moment had been more than a year in the making. SLUH entered last year's meet with championship hopes only to watch as Lee's Summit West obliterated the field with a 53, 34 points better than the second place Junior Billikens.

"Last year we felt it was the best we've ever had and we couldn't grab the ring," Linhares said.

With that in their mind, SLUH went back to work. Loaded with an immense amount of talent, the Junior Billikens spent the fall laying waste to everything in their path. They won the First Capitol Invitational. The varsity was first at the Forest Park XC Festival. The B team was fourth. SLUH took second in the top division of the Rim Rock Farm High School XC Classic. They scored 17 in the Metro Catholic Conference meet. They scored 17 again in the district championship.

When Saturday finally arrived, SLUH and the rest of the Class 4 boys were forced to wait. The championship race, slated for a 12:45 p.m. start, was pushed back. The medical tent was too busy treating athletes from previous races. The 80-degree heat and cloudless sky turned the already torturous course into a dangerous one.

Thirty minutes later the gun went off. Senior Caleb Ford took his customary spot at the front of the pack. The team's top runner, he raced to a second place finish in 16 minutes and 22 seconds. Junior Tim Rackers followed 19 seconds later for eighth place. Senior Tim McLaughlin was six seconds behind Rackers in 10th place. Senior Emmett Cookson was 30th while classmate Tony Minnick crossed in 17:25, good enough for 42nd.

In the mess that is the finish line, none of the SLUH coaches or parents could figure out Lee's Summit North's score. At most meets the addition is pretty easy.

Not so much this time around.

"We weren't quite sure where Lee's Summit North's fifth runner was," Linhares said.

It turned out he finished just behind Minnick. Lee's Summit North put its first four runners all within the top 27. What won the race for SLUH was McLaughlin.

He managed to work his way from the middle of the pack after the first mile to the top 10 at the finish.

"You're looking at a guy who marched through that race," Linhares said.

After the Junior Billikens received their trophy and were milling about, waiting to take group photos on the small set of bleachers, Linhares was on the phone ordering celebratory pizza back home. He told the person on the line to throw together 10 or 15 pizzas. He wasn't real sure what it would take to feed this group.

"I'm sure whatever you make we'll buy from you," he said.

For the first time all day, the addition didn't matter.