

The Covid Affect in XC

(Written after the 2023 season)

The original analysis of the impact of Covid on Oregon high school Cross country participation numbers closed with an inquiry: “We ponder how long it may take for the cross country numbers to rebound back to their recent norms.” With the benefit of some passing seasons, we are in a position to offer an update on this answer.

This update is not encouraging. The 2023 season – four years after Covid – shows that boys participation numbers are only 85% of the pre-Covid standard, and 87% for girls

What follows is the participation rate, by grade, for the five years pre-Covid and the three years since.

Statewide Cross Country participation rates from five seasons pre-Covid through three seasons following											
	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>Fresh</u>	<u>Soph</u>	<u>Junior</u>	<u>Senior</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>Fresh</u>	<u>Soph</u>	<u>Junior</u>	<u>Senior</u>
Boys 2015	3839	987	1009	984	859	Girls 2015	2900	643	812	770	675
Boys 2016	3993	1002	1075	1005	911	Girls 2016	2825	643	762	751	669
Boys 2017	3910	1024	1058	973	855	Girls 2017	2729	655	745	699	630
Boys 2018	3769	911	1047	974	837	Girls 2018	2577	613	658	691	615
Boys 2019	3951	1068	1061	987	835	Girls 2019	2493	610	692	615	576
Boys 2020c	2026	462	566	516	482	Girls 2020c	1270	312	317	357	284
Boys 2021	2947	887	681	743	636	Girls 2021	2020	633	475	438	474
Boys 2022	3377	1037	927	717	696	Girls 2022	2123	580	674	459	410
Boys 2023	3384	889	993	853	649	Girls 2023	2178	477	631	622	448

The percentage of students in a school population who participate in Cross Country						
	2019	2020c	2023	Change '19 to '20c	Change '19 to '23	
Small Schools (450 or fewer)	5.20%	3.00%	5.03%	-2.2%	-0.17%	
Medium Schools (1,100-451)	3.90%	2.20%	3.59%	-1.7%	-0.31%	
Large Schools (1,101+)	3.60%	1.70%	3.00%	-1.9%	-0.60%	
Private Schools	6.60%	3.40%	6.15%	-3.2%	-0.45%	

Of the average of all medium-sized schools, 3.90% of their student population participated in Cross Country prior to Covid, and that was reduced to 2.20% in the delayed season during the Covid pandemic. This was a reduction of 44% turnout.

Three years later 3.59% of medium-sized schools population ran Cross Country. This is still reduced relative to pre-Covid levels, but was improved. Similar analysis can be constructed for other school sizes.

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(Written after the 2020 season)

With the threat of Covid and the resulting shutdown of in-person schooling, it had always been an open question as to what impact this would have on participation in sports throughout the nation. Would turnout be diminished? Of course. But by how much? And would the decline be across the board or show gender or regional differences? We are in a position to determine this impact for high school Cross Country in Oregon.

We have explored the participation numbers, and certain historical trends from the recent pre-Covid seasons jump out: (1) sophomore year was commonly the largest turnout grade for both genders, with senior year the smallest; (2) for boys the number of freshmen regularly exceeded the number of seniors per season by a healthy margin (80+ runners), while no such pattern existed for girls; (3) historically from junior of one year to senior of the next year the continuation rate averages above 83%, and (4) girls have been experiencing a steady decline in participation in the four prior seasons.

Here are the numbers for the 2020c (covid season), plus the four years which precede it. In the box is the Covid-season senior class, and what that number was in prior years

Statewide Cross Country participation rates for the past five seasons											
	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>Fresh</u>	<u>Soph</u>	<u>Junior</u>	<u>Senior</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>Fresh</u>	<u>Soph</u>	<u>Junior</u>	<u>Senior</u>
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Conclusion:

- Participation in cross country statewide dropped significantly, by 48.85% relative to the prior season's numbers. Put another way, the number participating in cross country in 2020c is only 51.15% of the total who had done it a season prior, in 2019.
- Remarkably, this drop was balanced regardless of gender (relative to 2019 participation rates, girl's turnout declined 49.05% and boys 48.72%).
- Furthermore, in the recent three years (pre-covid) from junior of one year to senior of the next year the continuation rate averages 85%-86% (boys) and 83%-87% (girls), but was 48.8% (boys) and 46.1% (girls) in 2020c.
- When we further narrow down the data into school size, we see differing margins of decline
- Only four schools which fielded cross country teams in 2019 did not do so in 2020c (all four are small schools)

The percentage of students in a school population who participate in Cross Country				
	<u>Enrollment</u>	<u>2020c</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>change</u>
Small Schools	450 - fewer	3.0%	5.2%	-2.2%
Medium Schools	1100 - 451	2.2%	3.9%	-1.7%
Large Schools	1101 - larger	1.7%	3.6%	-1.9%
Private Schools	any	3.4%	6.6%	-3.2%

There are a lot of reasons why someone might not come out, all of which stem from a sequence of events initiated by Covid: (1) closed schools means challenges identifying and recruiting high and middle schoolers; (2) students or their parents may have had health concerns for themselves or their family; (3) emotional fatigue, as the anticipated start to the season was regularly postponed by OSAA; (4) some may have gotten jobs during the spring season and were reluctant to give them up as cross country season approached; (5) concerns about running with a mask; (6) the absence of a concluding State Championships removed a targeted goal (State was not considered feasible until after the season already began); and (7) with schools not meeting regularly in person each day, doing a sport might present transportation hardships for families (this is particularly true for young students and in communities devastated by wildfires).

Looking nationally, XC participation rates in 2020c were only 66.7% of what they were in 2019 (more specifically: 69.6% girls, 64.8% boys). This disparity with Oregon may be accounted for by the different policies states took to address the Covid virus. We ponder how long it may take for the cross country numbers to rebound back to their recent norms.