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XC captures second place at State with record breaking times

Otto Reitenbach and Tristan Kujawa, Core Staff, Staff Nov 15 2024

The St. Louis U. High varsity cross country team placed second at the 2024 MSHSAA Class 5 State Championship. After a dominant performance all season long, the Jr. Bills ran an excellent race, with a final team score of 84 points, behind only the Rockhurst Hawklets, who ran a near perfect race.



English



Team posing after the state meet. Photo | Courtesy of SLUH XC

Standards were high from the very beginning. With a season of excellence already under their belt, the Jr. Bills stepped up to the line with only one goal in mind: finish the job. Adrenaline pumping, all 16 teams in the Class 5 Championship made their way to the start line, and prepared to race. Unfortunately, they would have to wait longer than expected. Multiple false starts forced the runners to restart the race several times, only adding to the tension.

Finally, the race began. The Jr. Bills looked strong down the opening straight, with the SLUH pack pushing hard to escape the mess of runners around them. Facing extremely close competition from the state's fastest runners, SLUH took off early, coming through one kilometer in first place as a team. Sophomore Jackson Miller and senior Alex Bendaña ran 2:51 for the first kilometer, under two full seconds behind Rockhurst senior Henry Acorn in first place. SLUH senior Gus Talleur was right on their tail, with sophomore Ben Yoffie and junior Hendrix Fyvie following right behind him. The Jr. Bills were flying, and they continued to work hard through the second kilometer.

"I think it really looks like me and Jackson went out pretty fast," said Bendaña.

"We had a good box spot in the sense that we were on the far left. Everyone had

to kind of come to to us. So everyone kind of had to run a little extra distance, but we just had to run straight.

By two kilometers, SLUH held on to first place, but the lead was slipping. Rockhurst had dropped 17 points in the second kilometer, while the Bills gained seven, narrowing their lead to a mere seven points. Junior Luke Seivers from Rock Bridge moved into first individually, while Miller and Bendaña remained steady in the top pack. The other Jr. Bills swapped places, with sophomore Michael Luna jumping 23 places, running right alongside Talleur. Fyvie and Yoffie dropped slightly, but continued to run strong races.

“So I came around the turn to hit one kilometer and I saw the hundreds of fans,” said Luna. “There were people yelling giving me the adrenaline that caused me to push up so much, and there I found Gus and just settled in next to him following the Rockhurst 3 and 4 guys trying to stay on them.”

By three kilometers in, the Jr. Bills had surrendered first to the Hawklets, but impressive team running held SLUH strong in second place, with a 36-point lead on third place Raymond-Peculiar (Ray-Pec). Miller and Bendaña remained ever steady, holding on to sixth and eighth place, respectively. The top pack began to pull away, but Miller remained hot on the trail, holding on. Talleur remained solid in 22nd place, while Fyvie made moves to catch up. Luna and Yoffie held strong in 35th and 37th place, and junior Nick Ahlheim continued to run hard in 62nd place.

At four kilometers, the Jr. Bills continued to gain points, but they still had a sizable lead over Ray-Pec. Miller and Bendaña remained steady, at 6th and 8th place. Talleur continued to pick people off, moving up to 18th. Fyvie and Luna dropped 6 and 7 places but remained on the pace with their respective packs.

The final kilometer would make or break the race for the Jr. Bills, with every runner giving it his all. In the end, the Jr. Bills placed second to Rockhurst.

“Of course, it was disappointing to not come in first,” said Fyvie. “I knew that it was a good day for the team. You can't control what the other teams do. At the end of the day, you just need to tip your hat to your competitors and be proud of what your team has accomplished.”

Miller, as he has done all season, led the way for the Jr. Bills, snagging a seventh place finish in 15:16, which is also a new 5K school record. Bendaña, as he has done all season, finished right behind Miller in ninth place with a time of 15:17



“I would say we did execute the race plan,” said Bendaña. “Over our summer training trip, we talked about closing that last kilometer in under three minutes and 10 seconds, and Gus, Jackson, and I were all able to do that in under 3:04, which is pretty fast.”

Talleur ran the fastest final kilometer of the race for the Jr. Bills, moving up another four places to finish 14th with a time of 15:30. Fyvie was the next to roll into the crowded finishing short with a time of 16:03 and a placement of 34, missing out on all-state honors by 4 places.

“It was great for Hendrix to move up a little bit during the race,” said Porter. “He held on and was very close, closing in almost on all-state.”

Luna finished off the scoring five running 16:14 for 45th place. Yoffie (16:15) finished close to Luna for 47th place and Ahlheim (16:26) finished 62nd.

The last event of the day for the Jr. Bills was the much-deserved awards ceremony. Talleur was the first to receive his all-state honors for his 14th place finish. Bendaña picked up his first all-state honors for his ninth place finish and Miller snagged his second all-state honors for cross country with his seventh place finish.

“It felt really good to get that recognition,” said Bendaña. “If you really go all in on something like running, even if you don’t get a championship win, it’s really fulfilling.”

The team awards followed with the Jr. Bills claiming their second place trophy, despite the extremely low score of 84 points. This score is the lowest second place total ever at the state meet in school history, and one of the second lowest second place scores in Missouri High School Cross Country history dating back to 2002. The average time of 15:40 was the fastest ever in school history.

Despite the loss, there was a lot to celebrate on this historic day. The Jr. Bills did all they could to have control that successful day.

“Before the race, we talked about controlling what we can control,” said Porter. “That’s our own race. And our guys executed our plan perfectly. They ran in a style that would win in most years, and so we’re really happy with how they executed.”

The program now gears up for its final race of the season, Nike Cross Regionals Midwest (NXR). Hosted on the LaVern Gibson Championship Cross Cou



Course in Terre Haute, Indiana, it features the best competition in the Midwest, but also a rematch with Rockhurst in the championship division.

“There’s gonna be some great teams at the regional meet,” said Porter. “We’ve already raced at Indiana when we traveled up there early in the season to see how we’d finish against some of the top Indiana and Illinois teams. They’re going to be there and we’ll take a chance at seeing if we can improve on our finish from last year.”

The open division also features competition for the Jr. Bills as they will attempt to claim another team victory after winning in 2022, a feat that would highlight the depth and future of the program. At the end of the day, the Jr. Bills know to run their race, and control what they can control at NXR.

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