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XC takes first at Districts with impressive times

Otto Reitenbach and Tristan Kujawa, Core Staff, Staff Nov 8 2024

The St. Louis U. High Cross Country program turned in a dominant performance last Saturday, winning the Class 5, District 1 championship in Cape Girardeau by over 50 points.



English



The varsity team after their hard earned District Championship. | Courtesy of SLUH XC

Coming into the day, the Jr. Bills were clear favorites. The Kirkwood Pioneers hoped to topple the SLUH squad, with standout runner Graham Stevener looking to challenge the top Jr. Bills for the individual win.

Despite a three-week break from racing, the Jr. Bills were raring to go, taking a dominant position early into the race. At the one mile mark, senior Alex Bendaña led a strong top pack, one which included the challenger Stevener, along with SLUH sophomore Jackson Miller and senior Gus Talleur.

“It was more about practice racing experience,” said Bendaña. “We practice getting out and around a 4:50 mile pace, which is around the goal pace that I’m going to try to run on Friday, and it was reassuring to have Jackson and Gus close to me.”

Sophomore Michael Luna followed soon after, with sophomore Ben Yoffie right on his tail. The entire SLUH scoring pack came through one mile in under five minutes, a blazing hot pace to open the day. This pack continued to push throughout the race, attempting to break the rest of the field and pull away.

The top Jr. Bills remained close after two miles, with Miller, Bendaña, and Talleur all coming through in 10:02. Unfortunately, Stevener refused to drop, hanging tough with the SLUH pack. Juniors Hendrix Fyvie and Nick Ahlheim stay

strong throughout the middle of the race, both hanging within the top 15 places through two miles.

It all came down to the final mile. Stevener dug deep, and pulled away from the front pack. A strong kick carried him across the finish line in 15:26 for the individual championship. But it was a short-lived victory for the Pioneers, as Miller (15:36) snagged second and Bendaña (15:37) third for SLUH. Talleur placed 5th in 15:43 to round out a dominant top pack, which was instrumental towards a Jr. Bills victory.

Yoffie's eighth place finish (16:20), in concert with Ahlheim's 13th place (16:32), sealed the race for SLUH with a team score of 31 points. However, a 49-second 3-through-5 gap proves that work still needs to be done for the Jr. Bills. A gap like this at the State Meet could be fatal to their success.

"I don't think that it's our four and five running further back from our three," said head coach Joe Porter. "I think it's more that Gus ran closer to our one to two than he has. You know, our one to five gap was still about 50 seconds, which is kind of consistent with where it's been all year. It's just that our three has slid up closer to our one and two."

Finishing off the day were Fyvie (16:36; 20th) and Luna (17:00) placing 20th and 34th respectively.

The dominant team performance was further highlighted with individual honors as well. Bendaña, Miller, and Talleur were all First Team All-District, one of the highest honors at the district meet. Yoffie and Ahlheim took home Second Team All-District honors. All of them, along with Fyvie, would have qualified for state as an individual as well.

"We hadn't raced our varsity in three weeks," said Porter. "And so we went back, we got in three really hard weeks of training to kind of refocus those seven guys. And they were also a little rusty because they hadn't raced in a while. They had to remind themselves what racing is like. Now we're ready for this week."

Today, the Jr. Bills will compete at the state meet at the Gans Creek Cross Country Course in Columbia, Missouri. The course is fine tuned for fast racing with wide stretches and good footing. The Jr. Bills return three from last year's state lineup. They will help guide the four who have never raced at the state meet before.



“Words of advice would be, taking advantage of running at a younger age,” said Bendaña. “Especially for Ben Yoffie and Michael Luna running state as sophomores. That's a huge opportunity that they need to take advantage of.”

In addition to the course’s speed, competition will be top notch, with Jesuit rival Rockhurst and Columbia’s own Rock Bridge looking to contend with the Jr. Bills for the state title.

“It doesn't matter what they do, because we have no impact on what they do,” said Porter. “What we can control is how we race. And so we're going to focus on our gaps and our style of racing. And if we do that, then we should have a good day. If someone picks us up because they had a better day then so be it.”

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