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Athlete of the Week: Alex Bendaña

Theo Agniel, Sports Editor Sep 13 2024

Senior Alex Bendaña has flown under the radar for the past couple of years in the St. Louis U. High cross country program, scoring consistently for the team as one of its top varsity runners. However, there was nothing under the radar in his past race at the Granite City Invite, as the runner soared to new heights breaking the school's previous three mile record of 14:55 by an astonishing 24 seconds (final time of 14:31). Bendaña's miraculous run spurred the Jr. Bills to a landslide victory at the meet, and his presence in the squad is key to their hopes of winning a state championship for the first time since 2013.

Theo Agniel: Where does your SLUH cross country journey begin? Did you have any experience in other sports before joining the team?

Alex Bendana: I did the usual CYC and grade school sports: basketball, soccer, and golf. I'd probably say that I wasn't the most athletic kid or the star of the team. My mom had heard about SLUH cross country and how amazing it was but I said no because I thought that all cross country kids were weird—every

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knew that. Somehow, on the first day of practice I ended up on the top steps of the Field House, listening to coach Ford talk about the program. I didn't find a love for it at first, but by the end of my freshman season, I had made all of my friends through cross country.

TA: When did you find out throughout your cross country career that you had the potential to become a great runner?

AB: I feel like one of the reasons why I've been able to get to the level I'm at is through people like my parents, teammates, and coaches. They've always made me feel like I could accomplish my goals even when I was running unimpressive times.

TA: If you had to pick one meet that was your breakthrough meet, whether track or cross country, that really solidified yourself as a varsity contributor, what would that be?

AB: One that I remember specifically in my mind when I thought that this was something I could maybe be good at was Sioux Passage my freshman year. All I did was get a medal, and for me, that was the most amazing, coolest thing ever—to have a medal around my neck. That was the first time in my life, in a sporting experience, that I had earned an award for myself. I can't pinpoint a certain event besides that where I wanted to be on varsity. I mean, maybe going into sophomore year, I knew that I wanted to be on varsity because I started training every day over the summer.

TA: At what point did you officially make varsity cross country, and what was your role on the squad when first joined?

AB: I first made it my junior year, but the first time I put the actual varsity uniform on was at the end of my sophomore year when I was running to

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of the three alternates for the seven varsity runners. In the final races to earn that alternate spot I ended up not getting it, but I raced a varsity competition in the process. Not being an alternate made me mad and I was really motivated to get it that next year. So, I worked all year and then my junior year I was finally able to be on varsity. At the start of my junior year, I was our five guy, but as the season progressed, I became our consistent three runner.

TA: I think it's safe to say that everyone was astonished with your historical performance. Your time of 14:31 is SLUH's second fastest three mile time ever, an outstanding feat. What was going through your mind when you broke the original record?

AB: At this point, my mind has still not fully processed it. Usually, when I hear that someone has run sub-fifteen I'll be like, "What the hell, get out of here, that's unreal." Really, what I was thinking the entire time during that race was just to place in the top three. I needed to stay with Jackson and this O'Fallon guy, because my goal was to beat O'Fallon as a whole team. I was just thinking of trying to help the team the best by scoring the lowest amount of points possible. Going into these next races, I'm just going to be thinking about racing for the team. If we can't do it again at the state meet or the regional meet, then it doesn't matter at all. But it is kind of affirming to know that to win some of these bigger meets, we don't have to go out there and do something crazy. We just need to do something that we've already done.

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