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XC heads south, battles extreme conditions in Festus

Otto Reitenbach and Tristan Kujawa, Core Staff, Staff Sep 26 2024

The St. Louis U. High Cross Country program traveled south to Festus last Saturday, battling through a difficult course under brutal conditions for a successful meet against top competition.



English



Nathan Khouri in the Varsity race Saturday. Photo | Courtesy of Otto Reitenbach

In their first year at the Festus Bowles-Wright Invitational, the SLUH Jr. Bills squad showed determination and grit, running hard against two of the premier teams in the St. Louis Area, Kirkwood and Lafayette. In preparation for a difficult meet next week at the Palatine Invitational near Chicago, Illinois, the top 11 runners for the Jr. Bills were withheld from the race, with SLUH racing a “V2” squad instead. Despite missing their usual varsity lineup, SLUH pushed hard and took home third place, with 53 points behind second place Festus and 71 behind the champions Kirkwood.

Junior Tristan Kujawa led the charge for the Jr. Bills, running an ambitious race to take 16th place in a time of 17:52. He went out hard, and he held on despite the day’s taxing conditions.

“Tristan had a very good race,” said head coach Joe Porter. “He stayed in the teens the whole race and was right there with Kirkwood’s 4 and 5 runner as our quote-unquote 12th guy. It really gives us a lot of confidence going into Palatine and Freeburg”

This course featured several incredibly steep hills, made increasingly more difficult by slippery mud. With the temperature around 85 degrees and high humidity, the conditions were not primed for a fast day.

“It had many hills, each one progressively being higher in elevation and a sharp turn right next to a lake,” said sophomore Nathan Khouri. “During the race, I sighed every time we had to climb up another hill”

Despite that, the Jr. Bills continued to run impressive races. Khouri (18:01; 18th place) and junior Preston Eash (18:03; 21st) each earned a medal for their efforts. A great run from freshman Warnicke Beatty (18:17) gave him a hard earned PR, the only PR on the day for the Jr. Bills.

“Really, really impressive performance from Warnicke,” said Porter. “PRing in those conditions is really impressive and shows big things to come from him.”

Sophomore Joe Talleur (18:22) finished out the scoring for the Bills in 32nd, followed quickly behind by fellow sophomore Edmund Reske (18:24) in 33rd. Rounding up the varsity race were seniors Gavin Smith (18:38; 37th place) and Ethan Bognar (18:42; 38th).

These results may not seem impressive at first glance, but this is elite St. Louis competition. Festus brought home the Class 4 State Championship last year and Kirkwood placed in the top 10 in Class 5. A performance like this from the SLUH V2 squad is an incredible result, and a true testament to the Jr. Bills’ impressive team depth.

“It’s great for that second group to experience varsity style racing like a faster first mile,” said Porter. “To get third out of the 20 teams and to beat some of the usual powerhouses and it’s really impressive. A testament to the guys getting out and going after it.

Incredible results continued as the program turned focus to the JV race, facing about the same miserable conditions as the varsity race. Due to there not being a freshmen race, the freshmen raced alongside their JV brothers, adding depth to the squad.

From the start, junior Brayden Bussmann and senior Paddy Jones were running right behind two leaders from Kirkwood as they came up the hill and into mile one with a time of 5:37. As they neared the second mile, only Bussmann remained with the two leaders from Kirkwood, and despite being outnumbered he made his move.

“Right before the two mile mark I opened my stride at the top of the hill and flew past both Kirkwood guys taking first,” said Bussmann. “I booked it down the



straightaway while hearing coaches and fans yelling for me. I was pushing really hard to make a large gap.”

With still a third of the race left, Bussmann was uncertain whether his move was defiant enough. It did turn out to be enough for Bussmann, who won in an extremely fast time for this day and course with a 18:12.

“I started pushing really hard again with about 700 meters to go and kicked with about 300 meters,” said Bussmann. “Kirkwood didn’t stand a chance.”

However, Kirkwood definitely stood a chance on the team side placing eight in front of the No. 2 SLUH runner, freshman Gibby Fyvie (19:05).

“Keep in mind that these are Kirkwood’s eighth and ninth guys on their depth chart going up against people like Brayden,” said Porter. “It was a very hot, humid miserable day and for our guys to go out and compete the way they did was very good.”

Rounding out the top 5 were Jones (19:07), freshman Owen Williams (19:09) and junior Brady Vogt (19:12). Overall this scoring five led SLUH to a second place finish in the JV and with two freshmen scoring it is a good sign for the program’s future.

This weekend the program splits with a group of 15 being sent up north to the suburbs of Chicago for the Palatine Meet of Champions. Meanwhile, the rest of the team will head across the river to compete in the Freeburg Invitational and another opportunity to display depth.

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