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XC faces top Chi-Town competition, continues to shatter recordbooks

Otto Reitenbach and Tristan Kujawa, Core Staff, reporter Oct 4 2024

Since 2010, the St. Louis U. High Cross Country program has sent its top runners to the Palatine Meet of Champions in the suburbs of Chicago. The meet is known for its highly competitive field, hosting nine of the top ten teams in Illinois this year and marks the competitive midpoint of the cross country season. The meet's course also features notoriously small starting boxes and becomes thin only 100 meters into the race. The Jr. Bills were ready to take on this challenge.



English



Varsity cross country after the race at Palatine, Illinois. Photo | Courtesy of SLUH XC

As wind and light drizzle battered down on Jr. Bills in new baby blue jerseys, the gun was fired and the varsity race was underway. Within the first 100 meters, senior Alex Bendaña and sophomore Jackson Miller got in key positions in the top pack that would prove to be vital later on.

Coming through the first mile, Bendaña and Miller were side by side splitting an aggressive 4:46 mile. Both were on pace to break the previous SLUH meet record at Palatine.

Coming down the final stretch, the answer was clear as Miller surged to run a 14:48 3 mile for 6th place, while Bendaña was seconds off in 14:52 for 8th place, both beating Tim Rackers' record of 14:55 set back in 2010.

"The conditions weren't that great," said head coach Joe Porter. "Just the quality of the field really led to those historic times on the day."

Senior Gus Talleur was the next Jr. Bill, moving up the entire race to finish in 18th place with a time of 15:14. Rounding out the scoring five were sophomore Michael Luna (15:37) and junior Nick Ahlheim (15:46). Overall SLUH was able to take third place with 135 points, the highest place in SLUH's Palatine history.

Another historic mark for the Jr. Bills were medals from Bendaña, Miller, and Talleur, marking the first three-medal race for SLUH. Finally, this was the fastest average 3-mile time for the scoring five (15:15), beating the next best average time from 2014 by over 30 seconds.

"There were some tactical errors," said Porter. "We are going to try to fix that this week at Nike Twilight and that's why we are right back on it, to see if we can get a little bit better."

The JV race continued rewriting the history books, with junior Hendrix Fyvie winning the race in 15:44, the fastest JV time ever run in SLUH's Palatine history. Fyvie led for almost the entire race which is a testament to his mental strength and strong fitness at this point in the season.

"Hendrix with the individual win is outstanding," said Porter. "We have only had one individual win ever before and it is just great."

Following Fyvie was junior Jake Fitzpatrick (16:02), senior George Donahue (16:10), junior Tristan Kujawa (16:19), and sophomore Joe Talleur (16:28). This strong scoring five was able to score 37 points with an average time of 16:09, both the second best score and fastest average time in SLUH's palatine JV history, winning the team race easily.

Despite the historic numbers of the day, this is only the midpoint of the season with many greater performances to come later for the Jr. Bills.

"We haven't won that race very often," said Porter. "So it was great to show off our depth. Across the board it was great to have medals all the way to our 6th guy. There were some years where we only left with one medal from this race, but this year was different and that really shows the work we are putting in."

Meanwhile, the rest of the Jr. Bills traveled 40 minutes east to compete in the Freeburg Invitational. Despite the absence of SLUH's top 15, the varsity squad finished second out of 23 teams, while JV brought home the team victory. In slick and muddy conditions, the Jr. Bills put up a tremendous overall performance, punctuated by very strong individual efforts.

"It was a muddy, sloppy day," said assistant coach Charlie Hatch. "We needed some of that and we thrived under those conditions but I think we learned to embrace the conditions. We learned that cross country is really about racing in the elements."

Leading the charge for SLUH was freshman Warwick Beatty Jr. He went out hard early, and managed to compete with the top varsity competition, snagging 9th place and a 3-mile PR of 17:23! His confidence set the tone for the meet, and his teammates didn't let him down. Sophomore Edmund Reske was the second Jr. Bill to cross the finish line, grabbing 15th place in a time of 16:56. Senior Ethan Bognar (17:14) was quickly followed by fellow senior Gavin Smith (17:17), placing 26th and 31st respectively. Junior Brady Vogt (17:28) rounded out the scoring five in 39th place, bringing the total varsity score to 114.



Because teams were allowed ten entries into the varsity race, the Jr. Bills continued to grab varsity medals, winning nine by the race's end. Senior Patrick Jones (17:39) and freshman Gibbs Fyvie (17:40) both received medals, as well as junior Jesse Brower-Toland (18:00). Freshman Owen Williams finished out the varsity squad, only .4 seconds behind Brower-Toland, an impressive feat in his first ever varsity race.

"Great performances all around," said Hatch. "We really wanted to dominate these races and we want to make that impression on our seriousness yet our fun with the sport, kind of showing what the school is all about to the far reaches of the metro east."

The success didn't stop there. SLUH's JV squad dominated the next race, winning 17 of the 20 available medals. At the top end, junior Aidan Smith put on a show. Running ambitiously early, he went out hard and never looked back. Flying to a 17:33 finish, he brought home the individual win in impressive fashion.

"I worked to lay down a gap on the rest of the race and never looked back," said Smith. "As I crossed the line I couldn't help but smile and I even started to tear up a little bit because I thought of every moment that had led up to this race and how much this program is to me."

Following Smith, senior Otto Reitenbach took second place with a final time of 17:48. Both Smith and Reitenbach ran fast enough times to medal in the varsity race, a true testament to the depth of this SLUH squad. Soon behind the top two were freshman Phineas Gilbert (18:06) and senior Alex Keuss (18:14) to complete the Jr. Bill Podium sweep with third and fourth place. Sophomore Alex Pollaci (18:17) took 6th to give SLUH a near perfect score of 16. This display of depth and team running is exactly what the Jr. Bills were looking for, and it bodes well for important races down the road.

Overall, the SLUH cross country team saw major success across the Mississippi, and hopes are high for strong results as the team nears conference and district competition. The Jr. Bills hope to add to their accomplishments next Saturday, with a group of ten racing in Terre Haute, Indiana for the Nike XC Town Twilight, while the rest of the team takes on local competition at the Parkway West Invitational.



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