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Twenty years of glory: XC captures MCC; Donahue dominates Hancock

Charlie Gray, Tristan Kujawa, reporters Oct 20 2023

The St. Louis U. High Cross Country program earned an achievement two weeks ago that is so outstanding, it has never been done before. Winning their 20th consecutive MCC championship, the Jr. Bills have continued a legacy started before any of the runners were born.



English



Anthony Zangara and Noah Evers approach the finish line. Photo | Courtesy of SLUH XC

“I think it's an incredible testament to coach Joe Porter and to coach Brian Gilmore,” said coach Mike Lally. “They have been here for a long stretch. And Porter has been here for a tremendous amount of that stretch. I think they get a lot of credit—they never have an off year, never have a bad year, always figuring out a way to make things work throughout the years but there's a lot of credit over the course of those 20 years.”

Held annually at Jefferson Barracks, the course featured many sharp turns and plenty of rolling hills. It was a tough day to run fast, especially with the spontaneous heat wave in the middle of October. The MCC conference is very historically dominant in cross country, usually seeing one or two teams place high at the state championship. This year, however, the Jr. Bills flexed on the rest of the conference, taking home the win in every race, and perfect scoring all but one.

In the varsity race, the Jr. Bills got out fast, having all seven runners finish in the top nine. As the race went on, it became apparent senior Charlie Murray did not want anyone to be comfortable. Surging after nearly a mile and a half into the race, he found himself all alone in first. Murray never looked back. He took home first place overall, and is just the 15th SLUH athlete to win the individual title.

“I did not know what to expect” said Murray, “I just went out there with the plan to run fast. I made a move up one of the hills and nobody went with me. I led the rest of the way but it was a huge mental battle. Running alone is hard and I was just hoping nobody caught me. I am honored to be the 2023 MCC Champion.”

Following Murray (16:34.0) was the duet of freshman Jackson Miller (16:52.1) in second and junior Gus Talleur (16:54.0) in third. Then, senior Mason Scargall (16:54.0) finished 6th place overall, trailed by juniors George Donahue (17:17.4) and Alex Bendaña (17:17.8). The top five runners for SLUH all earned First Team All-Conference, and Bendaña earned Second Team All-Conference. The boys scored a very low total of 19 points, tied for the second lowest point total ever.

“It's about the athletes,” said head coach Joe Porter. “I am really proud of the day and for us to continue this streak is a great achievement for the program.”

The depth of the program was shown off in the JV race as well. Taking the first 20 spots in the race, the Jr. Bills absolutely dominated the competition.

“Getting 20 in a row before another runner is very impressive,” said coach Lally, “The depth of our JV program is striking.”

Following the domination of the JV race, the freshmen also wanted some time in the spotlight. With the weather starting to cooperate, the race was sure to be fast. At the start of the race, it was apparent that no other freshman team was anywhere near the caliber of the Jr. Bills, who finished with flying colors.

“I had a talk with Jim Linhares, former head coach of SLUH XC, I had him look at the numbers,” said Lally. “This freshman group is unlike any other freshman



we have ever seen. Five under 18 minutes means we are looking at a great three years of the program.”

Overall it was a historic day for the SLUH XC program. Winning for the 20th consecutive year is a feat that no other school has ever come close to achieving. With all the excitement, the Jr. Bills are still in the later weeks of the season, meaning that the runners are still looking to run their fastest times. With the postseason on the horizon, it is imperative that the confidence stays high and the intensity does not fade.

Hancock

Just like MCC, the Hancock Invitational this past Saturday was another success story for SLUH Cross Country. Normally, the Varsity 2 lineup runs this race, however this year some Varsity 1 athletes were chosen to run in this race, creating intense competition.

On a crisp morning at Jefferson Barracks Park, the varsity race kicked off the day. Junior George Donahue quickly took control of the entire race, gapping the field 800 meters into the race. This leadership by Donahue led to a 5:11 first mile for him, with the next closest runner already six seconds behind him.

“George creating that gap is a testament to him and how hard he has been working,” said Porter. “We talked about how that style of racing is very important. Taking risks and being bold is really important. He executed that perfectly.”

On the team side of the race it was all SLUH up front, with Donahue being crowned the Hancock Invitation Varsity Champion in a time of 16:33, celebrating with a strong show of emotion. Behind Donahue was junior Alex Bendana (16:41), senior Noah Evers (16:53), senior Anthony Zanagara (16:59), senior Charlie Gray (17:00), sophomore Jake Fitzpatrick (17:19), and senior Mason Scargall (17:29). SLUH easily won the team race with a score of 17, and with six of the seven varsity runners in the top ten it was truly a good day for the program.

“George ran with confidence and his finish really showed that,” said Lally. “He is ready for the postseason which I love.”



The JV race was the last race of the day. This race continued the tradition of having the freshman team in the JV race, which increased the competitiveness.

From the start, it was clear that it would be a battle to the finish with SLUH up front as sophomores Nick Ahlheim and Tristan Kujawa led the first mile. Following close behind was freshman Michael Luna, sophomore Hendrix Fyvie, and senior Matthew Musial, who was the JV champion last year.

The pace remained strong in the middle mile of the race, something that is not typical for a JV race, displaying the talent of the field. Ultimately, a move to the front by Kujawa was not enough to keep Musial from defending his title of JV Hancock Champion. Musial ran an impressive time for the race, winning in 17:07.

“Musial knew anything less than first place would be embarrassing,” said Lally. “He came in to win and he left Hancock that day as the champion once again.”

Close behind was Kujawa (17:10), Luna (17:16), Fyvie (17:29), and sophomore Preston Eash (17:35) to round out the scoring five.

“Michael Luna’s result was a headline that got buried due to Musial’s great win,” said Lally. “Running 17:16—I’m sure it puts him in the top 10 all time as a freshman. Michael displayed great confidence going up against a lot of juniors and seniors.”

The Jr. Bills easily won the JV race with the perfect score of 15. The showing of depth did not stop with the top five as SLUH captured 14 runners within the top 15, extremely impressive from the JV squad.

The program ventures to Buder Park tomorrow for the Big River Invitational, a flat course designed to produce fast times. For the varsity, this is the last regular meet of the season before the postseason begins. As the regular season begins to wind down for the Jr. Bills, they retain focus to run boldly, and Saturday will deliver on that focus.



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