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Final steps: SLUH XC competes in final regular season race of the year

Charlie Gray and Tristan Kujawa, Staff, reporter Nov 3 2023

On a cloudy and cold Saturday at St. Vincent Park, the Varsity team of the St. Louis U. High Cross Country program took first place in the the Class 5 District 3 Championship.

For the first time this year, SLUH faced off against a state rival, Rock Bridge High School. Once the gun went off, it was clear it would be a battle for the title of Class 5 District 3 Team Champions.

When the gun was fired, the Jr. Bills quickly took an excellent position in the race. At the front of the pack was freshman Jackson Miller alongside two Rock Bridge runners. They quickly gapped the field and ran an incredible 4:48 first mile.

Senior Charlie Murray and the trio of juniors Alex Bendaña, George Donahue, and Gus Talleur came through the mile mark in a time of 5:00.

“We talked a lot about finding our teammates” said head coach Joe Porter. “We did a good job of that and being confident in chaos. We simply did a good job.”



English

Through the two-mile mark, competition with Rock Bridge was still very close, as both SLUH and Rock Bridge had scores of 46. However with 400 meters to go, Miller made his move and passed a talented Rock Bridge runner.

“I was very excited that our freshman was able to pull away from a very good runner,” said assistant coach Brian Gilmore. “He had made his bold moves much earlier and at that point, he was just unleashing his kick. He put that guy away.”

This move earned Miller a time of 15:45 and a runner-up finish. Behind Miller was Murray (16:10). Both of these athletes earned first team all-district, a prestigious honor.

Following Murray was the trio of juniors. Leading the trio was Bendaña (16:19), with Talleur (16:20) and Donahue (16:22) close behind. The juniors all earned second team all-district, highlighting another incredible feat.

These top 5 runners led SLUH to become the Class 5 District 3 Team Champions. This marks the first time since 2020 that SLUH has won the District meet. In addition, this also marks the first time since 2019 SLUH has beaten Rock Bridge. These statistics further prove that this 2023 SLUH cross country squad is one of the most talented the program has ever seen.

Seniors Noah Evers (16:37) and Mason Scargall (16:59) rounded out the top seven and further cemented the team victory.

“We wanted to continue our progressions” said Porter. “The way that we've been racing is great, and that's always been our focus. In that way, it was a very good effort but it means nothing if we don't repeat it again. So it's a good day, and we refocus and get ready for the next one.”

Now, the Jr. Bills turn their focus to the state meet at Gans Creek Cross Country Course in Columbia, Missouri. This course features a 2K and 3K loop and is specifically designed to be a perfect balance of hills, flats, and turns to provide the finest cross country experience for the runners.

“I would say it is exciting that the state has an area that is dedicated entirely to just cross country,” said Porter. “I'm happy that the state itself is committed to having a venue like that because I think that's pretty unique and exciting.”

With Murray being the lone returner from last year's state lineup, it provides a unique challenge. However, the team remains confident that they can prevail.



“It’s great to have this experience of racing State before” said Murray. “I am extremely grateful to lead the boys through something like this. Also this gives me a certain confidence that I can spread to my teammates.”

The Jr. Bills also face competition they have not seen this year from around the state.

“We are running our own race, and nothing else changes,” said Porter. “So it has nothing to do with competition. We're gonna go and control the things that we can control, which is running as fast as we can on the day.”

On Wednesday just a few days before Districts, the JV team competed in its last regular season race of the year, the Findley Invitational. This meet was hosted at Jefferson Barracks Park, marking the third time SLUH has competed there this season.

In the freshmen race, Michael Luna took his second victory of the year in a time of 17:35. Following behind him were freshmen Luke Hartweger (17:48), Edmund Reske (18:29), Ben Yoffie (18:44), and Joe Talleur (18:57).

In the JV race, senior Anthony Zangara dominated his fellow teammates, winning with a time of 17:04. Behind Zangara was a duo of seniors, Lucas Strohmeyer (17:23) and Matthew Musial (17:27). Sophomores Tristan Kujawa (17:28) and Nick Ahlheim (17:29) rounded out the scoring five.

After the meet concluded, the entire XC program took part in the Findley Feast. This tradition featured pizza and desserts for all team members to munch on. Thus, the regular season concluded with a great night of brotherhood.



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