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Veterans Day as seen in the Prep News archives

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Athlete of the Week: Jackson Miller

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SPORTS

Fought for their brothers: Cross Country finishes third at state in historic year

Tristan Kujawa and Owen Williams, Staff Nov 14 2025

Bittersweet. This past Friday, one of the best teams in St. Louis U. High cross country history took to the Gans Creek Cross Country Course for the MSHSAA Class 5 State Cross Country Championships. Led by junior Jackson Miller's third place finish, the team finished third overall in the state, a disappointing result for a season filled with historic and one-of-a-kind moments.



The XC team supporting each other while walking away from the finish line. Owen Williams

Heading into the state meet, the Jr. Bills were one of the front runners to win. SLUH entered the meet with confidence after a historic regular season with a win at the Palatine Invitational among nationally-ranked competition and a fifth place finish at Nike Twilight, beating state rival Rock Bridge in the process. Their confidence and fitness levels were only reaffirmed at the district meet, as they took home both an individual and team title, as well as having four of the five scoring members of the team finish in under 16 minutes, despite the subpar conditions. As they toed the line at the legendary Gans course, it looked like this could be the team to bring home the first state cross country title since 2013.

Through the first kilometer of the race, Miller swiftly made his way to the top pack of the race coming through in sixth place at 2:53. The rest of the pack was soon to follow with senior Nick Ahlheim in 13th, junior Ben Yoffie in 18th, and senior Hendrix Fyvie in 20th.

Meanwhile, sophomore Warnicke Beatty Jr., senior Jake Fitzpatrick, and junior Michael Luna took more conservative approaches with Luna being the most surprising of all them coming through in 73rd. With 71 points at 1K mark, the Jr. Bills found themselves in first for a third year in a row.

"I knew there would be a ton of people getting out hard and too fast because of the excitement and adrenaline," said Luna. "So I decided to be patient and trust my strength to move up towards the middle of the race."

As the next few kilometers progressed, the runners whose fitness wasn't up to par began to drop back, leaving room for the Jr. Bills to weave through the runners who were slowly dropping. The team remained strong through the second kilometer, barely maintaining their first place lead while Liberty North dropped 17 points. The Jr. Bills lead was now just three points. If the Jr. Bills wanted the gold, they were going to have to crank up the intensity.



"Liberty North was doing pretty well executing their plan," said head coach Joe Porter. "However we were doing a solid job as well and really putting ourselves up there."

To the dismay of anyone cheering for SLUH, Ahlheim hit a brick wall shortly after the second kilometer due to illness, dropping from 16th to 48th. The Jr. Bills desperately needed a mid-race boost.

That boost came from Luna, whose risky plan ended up paying off big time. Despite starting off in 73rd, Luna passed a whopping 45 runners in the next two kilometers, keeping SLUH in contention with Liberty North.

Miller stayed strong at the front throughout the middle of the race, finding himself in fourth place by the 3K mark. Fyvie was not far behind, still looking strong. A string of Yoffie, Luna, and Beatty followed closely behind, all within three seconds of each other. Fitzpatrick was making up ground in the rear, moving up eight places and a few seconds ahead of ill-stricken Ahlheim. However, this is where the race shifted. Liberty North had a surge and overtook SLUH, now leading the race by 16 points.

It seemed like it was the final blow. But, there was still plenty of distance to go until the finish line. Anything could happen in the next two kilometers.

The Jr. Bills stayed strong in the fourth kilometer, with the majority of SLUH runners gaining at least one place. Miller remained towards the front of the race in fourth, right behind Rock Bridge runner Luke Sievers. Luna, Yoffie, Fyvie and Beatty were all running within 10 places of each other, all in the top 30. The podium was almost guaranteed, but If SLUH could finish strong, they would be celebrating on the ride home. Furthermore, Liberty North had dropped a few points, making the win still well within reach. However, third place team Rock Bridge was quietly sneaking up in the standings, now just four points behind SLUH.



Into the last kilometer, Liberty North was still in play having a razor thin 12-point lead, and the Jr. Bills looked strong up front. With Sievers fading, Miller took the opportunity and pulled away, running his last kilometer in 3:05 and capturing a new 5K personal record and setting a new 5K school record in 15:07 for third overall.

"It means a lot, just because six months ago, I couldn't run it all," said Miller. "It was a good comeback to now, and it was my highest place ever at cross country state."

Next into the chute was Beatty. He had easily the best last kilometer of anyone on the team, picking off a whopping 11 people to run a personal best time of 15:52 for 16th. Even though this was Beatty's first state meet, he raced like a seasoned veteran, showing promise for next year and beyond.

"It's means a lot," said Beatty, "It's really special to me how I can really show up for our team"

As the home stretch began to be filled with runners, every point now mattered if SLUH was going to win. Luna's strategic race played out well, and he came in in as the third SLUH scorer, running 15:55 for 24th, losing only one spot in the final kilometer. Then came Fyvie, running 15:59 for 28th, losing only two spots.

However the Jr. Bills were in desperate need of fifth scorer as it would take another 19 seconds before Yoffie came in at 16:18 for 43rd. Following behind Yoffie was Fitzpatrick (16:19, 45th) and Ahlheim (17:30, 119th).

Despite the impressive performances up front, the Jr. Bills lost yet another spot in the standings, fading into third place. The Jr. Bills ended the race with a final score of 97 points, finishing behind second place Rock Bridge and state champion Liberty North.

"It's tough to watch your teammates work year round for years, and still not be able to win," said Fyvie. "For me, personally, winning state as a team was the goal since freshman year and as a senior, I don't have another shot at it. That's just the truth."

Despite ending with a disappointing third place finish, the Jr. Bills continued to rewrite the history books. For the first time ever in SLUH cross country history, four athletes (Miller, Beatty, Luna, and Fyvie) were All-State placing themselves among the best runners in SLUH history. Also, Beatty put up one of the best performances an underclassman has ever had at the state meet as he is only the third ever sophomore to be an all-state finisher.

"The harsh nature of this sport is, is you have to get a little bit lucky to get to have all your guys able to show up on the right day," said Fyvie. "I know for a fact everyone put their full effort into the race, but we still probably didn't race as well as we could have on our best day, and sometimes that's just how it goes."

The Jr. Bills look to make up for the state performance this weekend as they travel back to LaVern Gibson Championship Cross Country Course in Terre Haute, Ind. for Nike Cross Regionals Midwest. This meet allows for the Jr. Bills to get a rematch among state rivals and among Illinois powerhouses Plainfield North and Plainfield South, nationally-ranked teams that SLUH beat at Palatine but lost to at Nike Twilight. Overall if the program has the day they know they can have, a shot at qualifying for Nike Cross Nationals in Oregon is not out of the question.

"You know, we should never look at it as one race determines the success of a season. And you start and you go back and look at for that varsity, the only time they were not first all (regular) season

Nike Twilight,” said Porter. “So when we come back look at the bigger picture of this 2025 season, we're not going to let one race or one outcome determine whether or not we view this as a success. We're going to look more at this bigger body of work. We're going to look at the relationships that were formed, the way that guys build each other up and take care of each other, the runs that happen every day with one another. Twenty years from now, that's where we're gonna look back and say that that was much more important than any race result.”

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