



Shining under the lights and at home: SLUH shows depth yet again in dual meet weekend

Tristan Kujawa and Owen Williams, Staff
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The St. Louis U. High Cross Country team competed both locally and out of state last weekend, with the majority of the team running in the Dale Shepherd Invitational hosted by Parkway West, and the top 10 varsity runners competing in the Nike Twilight Race of Champions. Despite losing their undefeated record, the top 10 performed well in a competitive environment, placing fifth. The rest of the team raced some of the best SLUH times on the Dale Shepherd course in recent years, claiming second in the varsity race, second in the JV race, and first in the freshman and sophomore race.

The varsity athletes boarded a bus Friday afternoon for the three-hour long trek to the LaVern Gibson Championship cross country course just outside of Terre Haute, Indiana. Many professional athletes, such as 1500-meter Olympic Champion Cole Hocker, have raced at the course, and now SLUH had the chance to put their name in the history books.

[Skip To Main Content](#)

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Oct 10 2025



English

With the sun well below the horizon, the Jr. Bills laced up their spikes for the most competitive meet of the season, and their only meet under the lights. After a long pause, the gun went off and over 450 runners shot out of the starting box, fighting for a good position. With the first mile being almost all downhill, it was fast-moving chaos from the start.

"It's kind of hard to run in the dark like that," said senior Nick Ahlheim. "I tripped a couple of times because I couldn't see where I was going."

At the mile mark, the majority of the Jr. Bills were all within 10 seconds of each other, with junior Jackson Miller leading the pack in a swift 4:45 first mile. Right on his shoulder were senior Hendrix Fyvie and Ahlheim just one second behind. Back in Missouri, a first mile this fast would put the Jr. Bills in the lead pack. However, at Twilight there was no lead pack, only an endless mob of runners stretched ten wide across the course. Miller and company found themselves close behind the front row, surrounded in the chaos. Because of the tight pack running, SLUH was in second place at the mile split.

"There aren't too many races when you're able to open in a 4:50 mile and come out in 100th place," said Fyvie. "It's weird running in a race with that many fast runners."

As the racers made two sharp hairpin turns, they began the long and tiring uphill ascent back towards the finish line. The Jr. Bills began to separate from each other, but each of the first seven SLUH individuals had their eyes on one of their teammates, something the team had discussed since day one.

At the four-kilometer mark, Miller and Ahlheim had held their positions, still glued to each other's side. Following a few seconds behind was Fyvie, leading the rest of the team, followed by sophomore Warnicke Beatty Jr., junior Micheal Luna, and junior Nathan Khouri. Junior Ben Yoffie and senior Jake Fitzpatrick were trailing not too far behind.

Sprinting down the finish straight, Miller finished at 15:30 in 30th place followed closely by Ahlheim, who ran a massive personal best 15:33 for 33rd.

"My team needed me, and that was one of the most important things that was going through my mind," said Ahlheim. "And that really pushed me until the end, knowing that I had a job to do."

[Skip To Main Content](#)

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Oct 10 2025

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Beatty edged out Fyvie in the last stretch to finish as SLUH's three-man with a time of 15:50 with Fyvie still on his tail at 15:52.

"I just treat it like it's a normal race," said Beatty, "and then I run well."

Yoffie made up significant ground to round out SLUH's scoring five in 90th place with a time of 16:03.

SLUH finished the meet dissatisfied, taking home 5th place with a score of 240, getting barely beaten out by both Plainfield North and South who scored 229. SLUH had beaten both of these schools just one week ago at the Palatine Meet of Champions, and if each of SLUH's scoring runners had run a mere one second faster, the bronze medal would be theirs.

"In a dark course and a very chaotic race, mistakes should happen," said head coach Joe Porter. "We shouldn't have picture perfect races five weeks out" from the State competition.

Despite the disappointing team finish, it was still one of SLUH's best performances on the course. Four of the Jr. Bills' top ten all-time performances at LaVern Gibson were run on Saturday night. Miller and Ahlheim landed at number four and five SLUH performances while Beatty claimed number nine and Fyvie ten. Fifth place was also SLUH's best team performance at the Nike Twilight meet.

"We have things that we can improve on, and that's very important," said Porter.

Meanwhile the rest of the program competed at the Parkway West Dale Shepard Invitational. With the top 10 in Terre Haute and 15 allowed to race in the varsity race, it allowed even more people to step up and showcase the depth of the program.

In the varsity race, redemption was on the Jr. Bills minds coming off of a disappointing fourth place finish last year. Through the first mile, senior Tristan Kujawa led the pack for the Jr. Bills coming through the mile in 5:15 in third with juniors JP Wildermuth and Joe Talleur trailing closely.

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"The pace was just blazing," said Wildermuth. "I held on and tried to stay connected to my teammates and it was honestly just a grind."

Brian Gilmore

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Throughout the second mile, Parkway West battled with SLUH breaking up SLUH's pack of three and finding themselves within striking distance of every SLUH scorer. As it came down to the finish, Wildermuth unleashed an impressive last mile, pulling away from the Parkway West No. 2 man to run 16:47 for third. Behind Wildermuth was Kujawa, running 16:59 (5th). The two sub-17:00 performances for the Jr. Bills were the fastest times run at Parkway West since 2022 when SLUH raced a V1 lineup, showcasing how much improvement has happened since then.

"On a hot day to have two sub-17s, shows how well we're really running right now," said Porter. "There's years that we've run a lot of our varsity guys in that race, and still did not have that many sub 17s. So to have two there is a good sign."

After Kujawa, junior Cullen Wenger continued his conservative race strategy, moving up in the last mile to run 17:23 (8th). Next, a duo of Jr. Bills sophomores, Jonah Ebenhoh (17:42, 11th) and Phin Gilbert (17:43, 12th) sprinted to the finish, beating Parkway West's No. 5 guy. However these efforts were not enough for the Jr. Bills, losing to Parkway West by 4 points to finish second.

"It was a testament to the depth of the program," said Porter. "To have our next group of guys to come out of that 20-team race with a second place is really validating."

In the JV race, the Jr. Bills were barely hanging on. With top JV athletes in the varsity race and course marshals misguiding the top 20 runners in the race, forcing them to turn around on the course, the race was going to be an uphill battle for the Jr. Bills.

Luckily throughout the race, the Jr. Bills navigated themselves towards the front. Battling back for the Jr. Bills were seniors Colton Eikermann (18:56, third) and Titus Zeigler (19:13, fifth). They were both victims of the misguidance but didn't falter under the chaos.

"Big credit to the guys," said Porter. "Especially for Colton to work his way back through the crowd, to come all the way back to third, you know, we're there were those guys who were put in a rough position kind of sneaked back in."

[Skip To Main Content](#)

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Finishing up the scorers was junior Tommy Williams (19:35), senior Martin Miller (19:38), and junior Mark Schoemehl (19:51). Overall the Jr. Bills stepped up, placing second behind Parkway West.

To conclude the day was the combined B/C race. Unlike the other races, it was clear that Jr. Bills would come out on top. From gun to tape, sophomore Clarence Nowak dominated the race, running 18:31 for first. Following behind him was freshman Leo Wildermuth (18:39), sophomores Jack Freeman (19:28) and Matt LeGrand (19:34), and freshman Anderson St. Clair (19:34). The Jr. Bills easily won with 18 points.

"Coming off the injury I didn't expect to win," said Nowak. "I was running what felt pretty easy and no one tried to keep pace with me. Then I saw the finish and realized that I'd actually done it"

Yesterday, the Jr. Bills faced local MCC schools at the annual Metro Catholic Conference Championships. SLUH has a rich history at this meet as they have won the varsity division 22 years in a row with similar levels of success in the Freshmen and JV races.



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