

There certainly is nothing like the Penn Relays! Kids who are accustomed to running in front of their teammates and a few parents are suddenly racing in a stadium filled with spectators! Whether it goes well or not, it is an experience they will never forget (although their old coach might, so don't be offended if I miss things!).

Our first big moment at the Penn Relays happened in **1998** with the 4x800 quartet of Aaron Boucher, Matt Urbanovich, Jeff Storch and Dave Sitzer. Having only run 8:08 prior, they were overlooked coming into the meet. After their Friday trial heat, they were no longer anonymous, winning the race in 7:52.66 and qualifying for the championship on Saturday (4th fastest qualifying time). On Saturday, in front of a huge crowd, they acquitted themselves admirably with a 7th place finish. We again made the cut-off for Penn the following two years, **1999** and **2000**, but did not qualify for the Championship of America. A bout of food poisoning took out our star 800 runner and anchor leg, Dave Sitzer, before the 2000 run and we still managed a respectable 8:04 without him. We also had our first individual competitor in 2000 with senior, Joe Halin, running the 3000.

The following year, **2001**, we skipped the 4x800 to run the Distance Medley Relay. Josh Joseph - 1200, Sean Mayers - 400, Kevin Hurley - 800 and Marc Pelerin - 1600, ran to a third place finish in the championship race behind the Alan Webb anchored team from South Lakes, VA and CBA of NJ. That 3rd place is still our best Penn Relays finish in school history to this date, and that school record time - 10:16.11 - is still on the books!

In **2002**, Marc Pelerin ran the 3000 and recorded Cherokee's best individual placing in our Penn Relays history, taking 2nd in 8:30.20. Marc would go on to win the NJ Meet of Champions that season in the 1600 and set school records in the 1600, 3200 and 5000 in addition to the DMR and SMR. The following year, **2003**, Keith Krieger became our third competitor in the Penn Relays 3000. Although he had what he considered an off-day, he still managed an 8:48.55 clocking.

In **2004**, while qualifying no 4x800 or DMR, the team was represented well by the 4x400 Meter Relay team of Alex Whirledge, Will Andes, James Maneval and Brett Wintermute, who ran well in their heat and qualified for the Philadelphia area final in the event.

In **2005**, another Cherokee 4x800 quartet qualified for Penn. Mike Candy, Will Andes, Tom Yersak and James Maneval carried the stick to a 6th place finish in their heat but failed to make the championship race.

In **2006**, the 4x800 team again made the relays and just missed making the championship final. Led by the 1:55 split of senior, Will Andes, the team (AJ Valentine, Rich Nelson, Andes, Colin Cunningham), ran 7:59.24 and finished 13th overall (with the top 12 going to the championship).

In **2007**, we did not have a distance relay in the meet but the sprinters had a good meet with the quartet of Kevin Merrigan, Steve Watson, Chris Stella and Sam Shapiro, setting a new school record in the 4x100 Meter Relay.

The following year, **2008**, Chris Steliga qualified for the long jump and finished 8th in the championship with a leap of 22'8". He was also part of the 4x100 (with Kevin Merrigan, Niraj Patel and Will Rapp) which won their heat and the 4x400 (with Merrigan, Rapp and AJ Valentine) which set a season best.

Two years later, **2010**, Ed Kramer competed in the High Jump Championship and finished 12th with a clearance of 6'5".

In **2011**, we had another 4x800 team qualify for the relays. Unfortunately, the team of Drew Viscidy, Ross Staudt, Ty Somers and Colin Merrigan, did not have their best day and failed to qualify for the championship.

The next year, **2012**, Colin Merrigan, Ross. Staudt and Drew Viscidy were back, teamed with Shawn Wilson in the 4x800. On Friday, they took 2nd in their heat to advance to the Championship of America. The stands were packed when the championship race went off at the height of the relays on Saturday. Colin got the team off to a good start, handing off in 4th to Sean who split 1:55.2, the fastest of any second leg, to move the team into the lead. Ross maintained that lead until the last 50 meters of his leg when two teams passed him and a couple of others closed the gap. With a lot of runners coming into the hand-off together, it was chaotic in the zone and the exchange from Ross to Drew resulted in a dropped baton. Drew did the best he could following the drop but the result was a disappointing 9th place finish in 7:49.85.

It was not until **2022** that another Cherokee team qualified for the 4x800 when Conor Jacob, Bobby Poplau, Nick Kuenkel and Patrick Ditmars got a last minute qualifier on the final weekend in the qualifying window. It was a young team but hopes were high. Unfortunately, it did not go as hoped and the team did not make the championship final. This was the same quartet that, while not running Penn in 2023, went on to win the NJ State Meet of Champions and set a school record of 7:41.17, the second fastest time ever run at the Meet of Champs.

That brings us to **2024** where two members of the 2022 and 2023 4x800 squad — seniors, Nick Kuenkel and Bobby Poplau - will team with sophomore, Logan Bromley, and freshman, Ben Realley and will look to add to the the history of Cherokee at the Penn Relays when they take to the track this Friday in the 4x800. Go Chiefs!