

The Boys Group 4 State Championship @ Holmdel, November 5, 2022

The 2022 Group 4 State Championship Race at Holmdel Park on Saturday, November 5th, was one for the ages! It's difficult to put into words all that transpired. At the end of the day, we walked away with the championship trophy, but what it took to get to that point was epic: a deep field . . . a tough course . . . unusual weather . . . unexpected health issues . . . heat related problems . . . delayed results . . . inaccuracies . . . frustration . . . corrections . . . elation . . . this day had it all.

We knew going in that the conditions were going to play a factor. With unseasonably warm weather and a 1:30 PM start time, we were aware that this would not be a "normal" state meet race. All week we were preaching – Hydrate! Hydrate! Hydrate! Even the bus ride to the park felt uncomfortably warm. After doing an abbreviated warm-up (in shorts and t-shirts) the boys used ice bags to cool themselves down before heading to the line for striders. The cloud cover, which had been around most of the day, moved out literally minutes prior to the start of the race, upping the heat factor considerably.

The first sign the coaches had that things were not going to go as we had hoped, came when the runners first exited the woods near the upper parking lot. The first four Cherokee athletes, **Patrick Ditmars, Nick Kuenkel, Conor Jacob and Bobby Poplau** seemed to be where expected in the field. However, fifth man, **Liam Tindall**, was not. The coaches were unaware that Liam began experiencing problems even before the gun went off and the first uphill 400 exacerbated his condition to the point where it was impossible for him to race. He continued running, because he is that type of athlete and individual, but he was unable to race as he normally would.

At the mile mark, which is mostly uphill, a pack of eight runners were together at 5:13, including Patrick and Nick. Conor was in another pack, nine seconds back. Bobby passed the marker in 5:30 and our five and six runners, **Anthony DiBatista and Danny Hassall**, came through at 5:52 and 5:57.

By the time the runners returned from the bowl and were coming through the 2-mile mark, it was apparent that the heat was taking a toll . . . not just on Cherokee but on the entire field which seemed more spread-out than normal. The strain of racing a difficult course in these conditions was evident. Nick was with the lead group of four and Patrick was in sixth, about nine seconds back. Conor had lost some ground in the second mile but was actively trying to move up. Bobby had also fallen back somewhat, and it was difficult to determine how the team race was going, but it didn't look good. Anthony was more than a half minute behind Bobby with Danny another ten seconds back.

Around the tennis courts, Lucas Reguinho of Elizabeth made a big move and the group of four was split with Nick fighting for second with Akshay Vadul of Edison. Patrick, meanwhile, was doing his best to close the gap on the leaders. As the remaining Cherokee runners entered the

woods to head to the finish, things looked grim, but Conor, Bobby, Anthony and Danny were all still engaged and trying to finish well despite the toll the heat had taken on each of them.

At the finish line, Reguinho looked strong and had pulled away from Nick and Vadul. Nick was battling for second when he collapsed 30 meters from the line. He got back to his feet and tried to run before falling again. Once again, he got up and, as Patrick ran by encouraging him, he went down again . . . and again, got up. He gradually made his way to the line as another athlete passed him. The determination Nick showed was awe inspiring! He was practically out on his feet but he refused to stop before reaching the line. In doing so, he gave us an opportunity for the team to win. Had he not finished, we would not have won or even advanced to the Meet of Champions.

Patrick crossed the line in third with his first sub-16:00 Holmdel clocking to lead the team with Nick in 5th at 16:08 despite going to the turf three times (they were 2nd and 3rd in the team scoring). Conor passed about eight runners in the last half mile to secure 12th place (9th in the team scoring). Bobby, who was having some heat issues of his own, kept fighting to the line and finished 40th (30th in the team scoring) while Anthony DiBatista stepped it up to finish 71st, 58th among team finishers, to complete our team score at 102 points and Danny finished a few spots back in 85th. Nick spent 20 mins after the race on the ground, being attended to by a trainer, unable to get up. Eventually, with help, he was able to stand and walk slowly back to the team tent.

The race wasn't what we were hoping for or expecting, and it seemed clear, at least to **Coach Shak**, that it was not enough. When asked by the team about our chances of winning, Shak replied: "There is zero percent chance that we won that race!"

He would not find out for quite a while that he would have to (thankfully!) eat those words.

As MileSplit reporter Jim Lambert said, "the finish area looked like a war zone." A number of runners were down and there were quite a few others who were unable to finish. While some of the other races were also affected by the hot conditions, it was clear that the Group 4 race took the brunt of it. As a result, only three of the eight wildcard teams to advance to the Meet of Champions were from Group 4 despite the fact that 10 of the top 20 ranked teams in the state were in the race.

One hour and 45 mins after the conclusion of the race (yes, you read that correctly!), the results were finally posted . . . showing Westfield 1st and Cherokee in 4th place behind Southern and Ridge. The Westfield boys, knowing they had not run their best race, were ecstatic to find out they had come out victorious. Unfortunately for them, it was soon discovered that the results were not accurate.

While a 4th place finish certainly seemed feasible based on the difficulties we had experienced in the race, upon further review we discovered that Patrick Ditmars had been omitted from the results and a runner from Camden Catholic was listed in 3rd place (yes, a runner from Camden

Catholic in the Group 4 PUBLIC school results!). We consulted with the meet director and the timing company and got the results corrected. Taking out the 72 points for our 6th runner and adding in the 2 points for Patrick moved us from 4th to 1st with Westfield in 2nd, 9 points back.

It was the 7th state championship for the program (1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2007, 2019, 2022) and comes on the heels of the program's 12th sectional championship last week. Patrick Ditmars became just the 7th Cherokee runner under 16:00 at Holmdel Park, joining Shawn Wilson (15:40 – 2012), Ethan Wechsler (15:41 – 2019), Marc Pelerin (15:44 – 2001), Keith Krieger (15:46 – 2002), Jack Shea (15:46 – 2015) and Nick Kuenkel (15:56 – 2022).

While we were both surprised and elated to realize we had won, we were also disgusted and angry with the incompetency and lack of concern demonstrated by the NJSIAA. There is no reason in the world that it should take almost two hours to get results at the state meet. At the Haddonfield JV meet a few days earlier, the results were available 5 mins after the race! Clearly, Fraulo timing needs to go, and clearly the NJSIAA needs to show some interest and demonstrate some concern for the sport of cross country.

We can only imagine the flood of emotions experienced by the boys of the Westfield team! Knowing they had not run the race they were capable of, they must have felt deflated (as did we) for the almost two hours prior to the posting of results, then elated to discover they had won . . . only to have it taken away from them moments later. This incompetency and indifference is inexcusable and the NJSIAA needs to be held accountable.

So yes, it was one for the ages! All seven runners are to be commended for facing adversity and persevering . . . never giving up! **Coach Thompson** and **Coach Shak** are proud and thankful to work with such a great group.

Oh, and Shak is happy to eat his words!