

## The NJ State Meet of Champions

We really didn't know what to expect as we headed to Holmdel for the State Meet of Champions on Saturday, November 12<sup>th</sup>. On the one hand, we had won the Group 4 State Meet the week prior. On the other hand, we were not sure how the heat-related health issues from that meet might affect the team this week. Was everyone fully recovered?

We had two goals coming into the race: beat all other public-school teams and finish as the top team from South Jersey. It would not be easy and would require some good racing on our part.

After a rainy day on Friday, there were some muddy spots and a few puddles on the course but, overall, it was in good shape and the weather was cooperating – overcast and upper 60s.

At 11:00 AM precisely, the gun sounded, and the race began!

Nine hundred meters in, as the runners exited the woods, we got our first look at how things were going. It was mixed. Our first 4 runners were in good position but our 5, 6 and 7 runners were farther back than we had hoped.

**Patrick Ditmars** and **Nick Kuenkel** were on the back of the front pack running comfortably with **Conor Jacob** right there and **Bobby Poplau** not too far behind . . . then a big gap back to **Liam Tindall, Anthony DiBatista** and **Danny Hassall**. They would need to stay focused and keep their heads in it if we were to have a chance at our goal!

As the lead pack passed the mile marker, George Andrus of Haddonfield had moved to the lead (hitting the marker in about 5:10) and was pressing the pace. Patrick and Nick were in 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> respectively but looked comfortable. Conor was in a second pack of runners in approximately 20<sup>th</sup> place. Bobby, although not far back time-wise, was running in about 50<sup>th</sup> place. Our 5-6-7 guys were still far back, but at the Meet of Champions, it is hard to tell as so many of the runners in the field are not in the team scoring, having qualified individually.

As the race proceeded down into “the bowl”, Patrick found himself in the lead and decided to roll with it. He began to open a lead and the “pack” became more of a line. Nick was in that line (about 7<sup>th</sup>) and still looked good. Conor had lost some ground and a few places, while Bobby was still around 50<sup>th</sup>. Liam, Anthony and Danny were still a good way back.

At the 2-mile mark, Patrick had a 5 second lead on the field and, although he was moving well, the chase pack, including Nick in 7<sup>th</sup>, was closing. Conor had lost several more places and was now around 34<sup>th</sup>, but he surged as he passed the 2-mile marker and began to slowly move back up in the field. Bobby was 52<sup>nd</sup> but also looked like he also had a lot left! No doubt we were in the mix through 4 runners, but would it be enough?

As they rounded the tennis courts, with about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to go, Colin Boler of Delbarton moved past Patrick into the lead and made a move to win the race. Patrick was now in the mix with the chase pack, which still included Nick in 7<sup>th</sup> place. Conor had passed 6 runners and was now in 28<sup>th</sup> with Bobby in 49<sup>th</sup>. It was good to see the two of them moving in the right direction! Liam, our 5<sup>th</sup> man, was still quite a distance behind Bobby but remained focused and was working hard to hold his position.

As the lead group entered the woods for the final half mile down to the finish, Boler had a 15-meter lead on a group that included Patrick (3<sup>rd</sup>) and Nick (7<sup>th</sup>). Also in that pack was Micah Lawson of Rahway, last week's Group 3 winner. He looked comfortable and strong. Conor was still in 28<sup>th</sup> but looked like he had something left for the final push, and Bobby had moved up to 46<sup>th</sup> and also appeared to be full of run!

The biggest change in the lead pack over the last 800 was the dynamic finish by Rahway's Micah Lawson! With a half mile to go he was running in 6<sup>th</sup>. At the finish, he was ahead comfortably and crossed the line in a very fast 15:33!

Patrick was in 3<sup>rd</sup> behind Haddonfield's, George Andrus, exiting the woods, but kicked well over the final 200 to move into 2<sup>nd</sup> place and he crossed the line in 15:39, a new Cherokee record at Holmdel! Nick was also showing a good turn of speed over the final stretch as he moved from 7<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>, just a step behind Andrus in 3<sup>rd</sup>! Nick's time of 15:41 ties him for 3<sup>rd</sup> on the Cherokee all-time list! He was also the first underclassman across the line! Conor caught 7 more runners over the last half mile to finish in 21<sup>st</sup> at 16:25 and Bobby closed even better, passing 15 runners to cross the line in 31<sup>st</sup> with a huge Holmdel PR of 16:39!

It was not until 1:19 later that our 5<sup>th</sup> man, Liam Tindall, crossed the line in 126<sup>th</sup> place at 17:58, while our 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> men, Anthony DiBatista and Danny Hassall were 130<sup>th</sup> and 133<sup>rd</sup>.

We knew our upfront strength gave us a shot, but we would just have to wait for the results to see if we had done enough to reach our goals. Hopefully, we would not have to wait 2 hours like last week!

Thankfully, we did not. Approximately 40 minutes later (still way too long!) the results were out. We were 3<sup>rd</sup>! CBA won handily with 44 points while Union Catholic took 2<sup>nd</sup> with 98. Our score of 106 was only 8 points back and we beat 4<sup>th</sup> place Westfield by 15! Our team scoring places were: Patrick – 1<sup>st</sup>, Nick – 3<sup>rd</sup>, Conor – 13<sup>th</sup>, Bobby – 19<sup>th</sup>, Liam – 70<sup>th</sup>, Anthony 74<sup>th</sup>, Danny – 76<sup>th</sup>.

**Goals accomplished! Top public-school team! Top South Jersey team!**