

*“Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”*

**-Francis of Assisi**

Last year at this time we were celebrating a tremendously successful 2019 cross country campaign, having won county, conference, sectional and state championships. Led by a terrific senior class, we knew it was our time and we came through with one of the most successful seasons in the history of Cherokee Cross Country. While we also knew we were losing an incredibly talented senior class, we were optimistic. A good winter and spring track season could set us up for a great summer of training and we could roll that into cross country 2020!

A lot can change in a year . . .

Thank you, Covid . . .

Goodbye Spring Track. Hello remote education . . .

So, in a year like no other year, we really had to think about doing what was **necessary**. Each of us . . .okay, each of you . . . had to train with no guarantee of racing. It was not fun. It was hard. It was, at times, demoralizing. But it was **necessary**.

Once we entered the summer, NJSIAA plans for the fall season began to take shape. On the plus side, there would be a season! On the minus, it would not be a normal season.

Still, it allowed us to set goals and develop a plan. We were no longer in limbo, just doing what was necessary without any clear idea of why. We began doing what was **possible** . . . working toward a season that would encompass three batch meets, two SJTCA meet and three championship races – the Olympic Conference Championship, the Burlington County Championship and the South Jersey Group 4 Sectional Championship.

Led by senior captains, **Brett Shea** and **Nico Grilli**, we knew we had strength up front. What we did not know was who would replace the other five members of last year's varsity seven who had moved on. Could we put together a team capable of competing for conference, county and sectional championships? Perhaps a county championship was realistic but, given what rival Cherry Hill East was returning, many thought it would be **impossible** to win the conference and sectional races.

As the summer went by and we moved into September, we recognized that there was real potential among the group of 28 athletes on the squad. Each class had much to offer.

In the senior class, in addition to **Grilli** and **Shea**, **Dylan Odud** was entering the season in very good shape having had his best summer of training ever. And, while they had both had health issues over the past year, **Milo Barkow** and **Christian Bennett** were coming in ready to give all that they had to the team.

Among the junior class, **Bradley Popler** stood out. He was clearly in the best shape of his life and was training with focus and intent. He looked ready to contend for a varsity spot! **Aiden Dickinson**, **Jameson Crozier** and **Joe Natoli** all looked to be in the mix, each with the talent to get there. It would just depend on staying healthy and training consistently. Even our track duo of **Lucas Hatch** and **Kevin Hess** came into the season ready to work! Track may be their passion, but they were going to put their all into the cross country season.

In the sophomore class, **Conor Jacob**, **Patrick Ditmars** and **Tommy Bromley** all looked fit and ready to roll! All three were certainly part of the conversation as to who would fill those varsity spots! **Joe Hough** was perhaps the biggest surprise of the class. Having trained consistently through the pandemic he had transformed himself into a competitive runner and it appeared he would now be knocking on the door of the varsity seven! The other returner from this class, **Danny Hassall**, had done his running and would also be looking for improvement. Newcomer, **Ethan Weisenberg**, had trained diligently and was excited to join the team while fellow newcomer, **Nick Campbell** was, unfortunately, sidelined early with an injury.

And then there was the freshman class . . . A group that brought not only talent, but a great attitude to the mix! **Nick Kuenkel**, **Andrew Free**, **Matteo Evola**, **Julian Hatch**, **Luke Reistle**, **Bobby Poplau**, **Silas Matteson**, **Nate Meyer**, **Jack Delaney** and **Nimai Kumar** were a group that very much reminded us of last year's senior class when they were freshmen. You know . . . that class that went on to win a state championship. As a coaching staff, we admired their ability but, even more, we appreciated their great attitudes! While they gave us cause to look to the future with excitement, it was apparent that their addition to our team would make a difference even this season.

And so, with renewed excitement after months of isolation, we began to dream of championships! Slowly those dreams became goals and, ultimately, a training plan was put into place to get there. We had done the necessary. We were doing the possible.

The next step was to take a stab at *the impossible*.

When the racing season began in October, we got our first dose of reality in Batch Meet #1 where we matched up against Cherry Hill East, ranked #4 in the state in the Milesplit Preseason Poll. East showed their strength with a convincing win, putting three runners in front of our second and six in front of our fourth. Proof to some that our goal of beating East at the Conference and/or Sectional Meets was impossible. Evidence to us that we had more work to do but we had a shot if we stayed focused and determined.

Batch Meet #2 was another challenge for us as we faced a very good Washington Township team who came into the competition ranked fourth in South Jersey while we were ranked third. The meet was as close as expected and we were just able to slip by the Minutemen by a mere two points, thanks to significant improvement from week one by all seven runners.

We held out our top six runners in Batch Meet #3 to prepare for the upcoming conference championship race. In addition, we were missing two others from our top ten, **Joe Natoli** (who would miss the rest of the season due to injury) and **Joe Hough**. Despite this, we were still able to finish second, just five points behind Shawnee, South Jersey's eight ranked team.

Over the course of the three batch meets, we were not only able to get a read on the strength of our varsity squad and what would be required to contend at the championships, we also demonstrated the depth of this team as we went undefeated in the three JV races. Now it was time for the championship season!

As we took to the course on October 24<sup>th</sup> for the Olympic Conference Championship, we knew we had to run our best to have a shot at the victory. The varsity team responded with a great race. Unfortunately, it was not quite the perfect race we needed for a win over Cherry Hill East as they held on for a three-point victory. The most notable performances of the meet were turned in by two sophomores, **Conor Jacob** and **Patrick Ditmars**, both of whom set new 5k PRs! While disappointed not to win, we took solace in the fact that we had significantly closed the gap on East, which gave us hope for sectionals! The JV team also came up a bit short as East ran a strong race to take that title and relegate us to second place in both competitions.

The following week was an off week for the JV squad while the varsity traveled to the Rancocas Valley Athletic Complex for the Burlington County Open, a meet we had won each of the previous six years and 19 times in the last 25 years. This year was to be no different as we once again finished first with 35 points, 45 fewer than runner-up, Shawnee! The senior captains were the stars of this show as they took first and second individually. **Nico Grilli** led the way with the individual victory, making him the 10<sup>th</sup> County Champion in school history, while **Brett Shea** continued his steady improvement, running his best race yet for second! With two weeks until Sectionals, we were moving in the right direction!

While the varsity squad prepared for Sectionals, the rest of the team were back at Dream Park for two SJTCA Meets.

The first took place on a beautiful sunny Saturday. With the top seven not in attendance and several others out with injuries, the team still acquitted itself well, finishing 6<sup>th</sup> in a field of 11 in the varsity race and winning the JV race against a somewhat depleted field. The most notable performance of the day came from freshman, **Luke Reistle**, who won the JV competition and improved his 5k PR by almost 20 seconds in the process!

The second SJTCA meet included a freshman race along with a JV competition. By this point in the year, the challenge of running every meet at Dream Park was beginning to take a toll on the squad. All the athletes were doing their best to fight off the growing fatigue of the season. The freshman race went first and even without top frosh, **Nick Kuenkel** (training with the varsity for sectionals), the team took the victory, led by second place finisher, **Julian Hatch**. The only PR in the race was recorded by **Silas Matteson** who, despite the fatigue of the long season, dropped almost a half a minute off of his previous best! With the freshmen running separately, the JV team was a little depleted but still had some good performances as they placed second, once again behind a strong Cherry Hill East squad. The best race of the group came from junior, **Aiden Dickinson**, who tied his previous 5k PR to finish fifth, neck and neck with teammate, **Joe Hough**, in fourth!

And so, it now all came down to one race . . . The South Jersey Group 4 Sectional Championship. The most important race of the season given that states and MOCs were cancelled due to Covid. Four of the top 16 ranked teams in the state were in the field - #6 Cherry Hill East, #11 Cherokee, #14 Southern and #16 Washington Township. This was our moment! How would we respond?

On race day, the first thing of note was the horrible condition of the course. After 3 days of rain, the DREAM Park course (which is questionable on a good day) looked more like Nightmare Park! With seven races having run before us, we took to the course under the worst conditions of the day. There was no way to avoid the mud, the divots and the standing water on the sloppy, soft, slow course!

Despite the tough course conditions, the boys appeared excited, confident and determined! However, when the gun went off, Cherry Hill East surged aggressively and, at the first mile, had a decisive advantage with Southern in second and us third, with Washington Township close on our heels. Our motto all year was to run smart in the first half of the race and tough in the second half. We hoped that was the strategy the seven Cherokee runners were following.

It was . . .

By mile two, we were in second place and the gap had closed on East. You could see and feel the determination as each Cherokee runner passed by!

Mile three is where it really came together . . .

**Nico Grilli** was in third with several runners right behind him. He was clearly hurting but was determined to hold his spot. He did just that, crossing the line in third place!

**Brett Shea** was dialed in over the last part of the race! He passed several runners in that space, including East's top two, to take sixth!

Sophomore, **Patrick Ditmars**, was on fire! A look of determination was etched in his face and he moved up nicely to secure eleventh place with a new 5k PR despite the sloppy course!

Behind Patrick, senior **Dylan Odud** was finishing out his cross country career in style! He too had a look of intense determination as he moved up steadily and sprinted by one last runner at the line to place twelfth!

Although fifth man, **Conor Jacob**, was not having his best day, he absolutely refused to give up! He knew his teammates needed him and he was not going to let them down. Conor hung tough over the last half mile, holding off challenges from several runners to secure sixteenth place, giving us five runners in front of East's fourth!

Sixth man, Freshman, **Nick Kuenkel**, was also on his way to a great performance as he passed East's fifth man in the last stages of the race and just missed getting East's fourth runner at the line, establishing a new 5k PR in the process!

Finally, seventh man, **Bradley Popler**, did his part for the team. Like Conor, Bradley also wasn't having his *best* day. However, he gave all he had on *this* day! He finished in front of the seventh runner from 12 of the 13 teams in the race and beat top-five runners from 11 of the 13 teams! A fitting conclusion to an almost perfect team race!

After doing what was necessary and then what was possible, this team finally accomplished *the seemingly impossible*!

If not *impossible*, at least *improbable*. After all, East returned Six of their top seven runners from last year's team that finished 4<sup>th</sup> in the Group 4 State Meet and 8<sup>th</sup> at the Meet of Champions, while we had five new runners in our top seven this year. This upset victory was a tribute to the focus, determination and toughness exhibited this season, not just from the seven sectional racers, but from the entire team!

As your coaches, we are immensely proud of you!

Thank you, **seniors**, for your hard work and dedication over the years! You have made a positive impact on the Cherokee Cross Country Program and we are forever grateful. Please know that, whatever we accomplish in the coming years, you are, and will always be, a part of it . . .

**For those of you returning:** The future looks bright! Although this year's seniors will be hard to replace, it is their time to move on and your time to step up. Like Teddy Roosevelt said: *Believe you can and you're halfway there!* What do you believe you can accomplish? Dream big! Then . . . turn that dream into a plan and start working. You will get there!

**Thank you . . .**

Thank you, **parents** for the support you provide. It really does make a difference!

Thank you, members of **the booster club** for your support!

Thanks to our AD, **Mr. Agnew**, for his support of the program!

Thank you, **Mr. Smyth**, for all the great photos and for keeping the website up to date!

Thank you, **Mr. Shea**, for the great work you have done with the Marlton Rec Program! It has made a huge difference in our program!

Thank you, **Ben Brandreth**, for your help as our manager on workout days!

Most of all, thank you **athletes** for your hard work and dedication. As your coaches, we feel incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to work with such great young men. We are proud of you!

*Coach Shak, Coach Thompson and Coach Spaeth*