



Finishing the Race: Boys' Cross Country Concludes Season with Incredible Performance

The stories of our two-peat state qualifying cross country team

Article, Braden Davis, Editor

It often takes a great deal of time, commitment, and dedication for a sports team to thrive, and the cross-country team has gone above and beyond to prove what it takes to become an elite force. The HHS boys' cross country team wrapped up its impressive season last weekend at the IHSA State Cross Country meet, achieving the best team finish in the school's history. However, the road to building this remarkable program has been years in the making, and as the team acknowledged, it hasn't been an easy road to get here.

Opening up the season with a first-place team finish at the Murphysboro Invitational, the team set the bar high from the start. They did not get complacent, however. Practices continued to get more frequent and intense, and some weeks completely drained the boys physically and mentally. Through this, the team did not give up or slow down; ultimately, the motivation to keep going grew stronger, as did the team unity in the process.

The team advanced past regionals and sectionals to earn its spot at state for the second year in a row. Despite competing with schools that are triple their size, our boys stepped up and demonstrated perseverance even when the odds were stacked against them. With the journey to qualify complete, the boys set out with one final motivation: to push each other and perform as one of the best teams in school history.

With this goal in mind, the team gave the last race of the year their all. Individually, Mason King (12) led the boys with a time of 15:07.95 and placed 40th out of a tough field of 235 runners. Next came Maddox Burks (12), who placed 94th with a time of 15:33.65, and Nolen Frost (11), who placed 97th with a time of 15:33.65. Closely behind in 102nd place was Miles Ellet (10) with a finish time of 15:40.70. Concluding the scoring times in 122nd place was Braden Davis (12), who ran a time of 15:45.07. Elliott Polley (10) and Sam Jolliff (12) both ran strong races with times of 16:29.8 and 16:40.2, respectively. Out of our seven runners, six of them ran their personal bests, and the times they ran are now ranked among the fastest all-time in Herrin.



Provided Photo

The boys team poses with their coaches after finishing the state meet

As the results were tallied, Herrin's name surged further and further up. The team had finished as the twelfth best in 2A, and with that, they had achieved the goal as the best in school history. To all who were there, it was an indescribable moment of celebration and excitement that swept through like a wave. This goal, which had been years in the making, finally came to fruition.

Maddox Burks elaborated on the state performance, explaining that "We were all proud of each other. It was such a surreal feeling to see the entire team congratulate each other and have those moments together." Mason King echoed similar sentiments and reflected that "there has been so much progress among this team. Each year has built on the others, and even through difficult times, we pushed hard to get where we are."

The team has always seen moderate success, but what made this year different? The answer, according to head coach James Elliott, was the team culture that was fostered. "It's truly all because of the hard work our boys have put in. They all helped influence the culture of the team.

When you have your entire varsity and JV teams giving their all at each practice, that's what sets them apart and makes them improve. It's about more than just one individual; it's about the team."

The team culture Coach Elliott is referring to didn't just materialize overnight, though; it ultimately started way back at the beginning of June, just one week after track ended. Even through extreme heat, holidays, and vacations, the team stayed committed to putting in mileage during summer break. The workouts gradually grew tougher, yet no one faltered or gave up.

Miles Ellet said that "Yes, the practices continued to get more difficult throughout the season, but to improve, we knew we had to keep going and not give up." Everyone pushed and encouraged each other, and by the time school started, the boys were more than ready to compete.

As the team departed the state meet for home, they reflected on the journey of the season that brought them where they are today. The road was not without bumps along the way, from unexpected injuries to challenging courses, but with the help of the coaches and the team, they persevered through.

Braden Davis elaborated that the team "dealt with several injuries throughout the year, but we all stepped up to perform. Our coaches (Coach Elliott, Coach Blakey, and Coach Tate) invested so much time into this season, and our success could not have happened without their constant support, encouragement, and motivation." All on the team agreed.

Ultimately, the team concluded that the most important lesson they learned was the value of teamwork and unity. The boys all describe their teammates as brothers because of how close they've gotten throughout the season. "We're not just teammates, we're like brothers. We might not be biologically related, but we go through all of the difficult practices together and help motivate each other, and that bond instantly forms," said Sam Jolliiff.

While the team is losing six seniors after this year, the legacy of hard work and unity left behind will surely not be forgotten. This part of the story is yet to be told, but the team feels confident that they will pick up the pieces and keep progressing forward.

Nolen Frost, who will be a senior next year, explained that "our current runners are going to have to step up. It might take some time to rebuild, but as with our cross-country races, it all takes patience and endurance. Yes, we are losing several key runners in our squad, but as we have done before, we will persevere."

This team is a remarkable example of the power of perseverance, hard work, and endurance, even in the face of struggle. Our boys' cross-country team has finished this part of the journey and now looks forward to the bright future ahead. As Maddox Burks concluded, "Once you stop overthinking what you're about to do, the hard work already put in shows through. Our team means everything to me, and I can't wait to see what they do next year."