



Cross Country in the Southern Connecticut Conference

By Al Carbone, Commissioner

As the Southern Connecticut Conference celebrates its 25th year in 2018-19, cross country has enjoyed a successful run, no pun intended, as one of the league's marquee sports.

The league came together in 1994 with an unlikely merger of schools from five different leagues (Housatonic, Shoreline, All-Connecticut Conference and District League) and with that came a unique challenge to host one championship event for 18 schools.

The newly-formed conference and its head coaches spent a lot of time discussing whether having a 3.1-mile championship race course was necessary. At that time, the CIAC state championship races were just 2.5 miles in distance.

The first SCC championship meet was held at the Racebrook Trails in Orange, hosted by Amity Regional's coaches Bob Orgovan, Chris Dickerson and Thom Jacobs. The meet was held on Saturday, Oct. 23, 1994. Xavier won the inaugural boys race, easily ahead of runner-up Notre Dame (47 to 85). Xavier's Steve Maheu won the race in 16:24. Maheu would also repeat as SCC champion, winning the 1995 race as well. Cheshire, under the direction of head coach Rob Schaefer, won the first SCC girls team title with Lyman Hall's Allison Ciosek, who went on to run at the University of Connecticut, capturing first place (15:44 in 2.4 miles).

The Rams also won the league's first-ever state championship, capturing the Class L title on Oct. 29. Later that day, Xavier and head coach Bob Michalski took home the boys Class LL state title.

In 1995, both the Amity Regional boys and girls teams won league titles. The Spartan boys narrowly defeated runner-up Xavier (48 to 51), while the girls out-pointed runner-up Guilford.

After three years in bucolic Orange, the league moved the championship meet to a more spacious place along the serene Long Island Sound – Hammonasset State Park in Madison. It is Connecticut's largest shoreline park with over two miles of beach. The park first opened to the public in 1920, briefly closing during World War II to serve as an aircraft range.

Fairfield Prep won the 1997 boys title, outdistancing runner-up Xavier, 31 to 41. The Jesuits had five runners finish in the top 13 of the race, but Xavier's Neal D'Amato won the race in 16:16. On the girls side, Branford's Liza Grudzinski, who went on to a fine collegiate career at Marist, won the race in 18:56 – nearly 77 seconds faster than the next runner.

The SCC championship meet remained at Hammonasset State Park for 18 more years.

In 1998, Amity Regional had the top two finishers, including winner Amy Pleckaitis (18:45), who would go on to run at Florida State, but Guilford had six runners in the top 12 to earn the SCC title by just six points (40 to 46). On the boys side, Fairfield Prep, led by winner Brian McGovern (who attend and run for the University of North Carolina), ran away with the 1998 title (30 points) as its five runners all placed in the top 11 of the race.

Xavier then established itself as a dominant program of the SCC, winning three straight boys titles from 1999 to 2001, and also won three in a four-year span from 2009 to 2012.

From 2000 to 2004, Branford's Cunningham family dominated the SCC girls cross country championship meet. In 2000 and 2001, Niahm Cunningham captured first place, and when she graduated, her sister Orlaith won in 2002 and 2003. For the record, Orlaith's 19:05 finish during the 2003 race is the family record. Both sisters went on to run at the University of Connecticut.

In 2004, both the Guilford boys and girls won league titles with Amity Regional earning runner-up finishes in both genders. Guilford's Jay Koloseus, who would run collegiately at Syracuse, won the 2014 and 2015 individual titles. Koloseus' 2014 race time of 15:41 would serve as the league record for eight years until 2013 when Fairfield Prep's Christian Alvarado eclipsed it with a 15:16 finish.

In 2005, Amity Regional won the title, setting a league record with 28 points. The Spartans' five runners employed a winning "pack" strategy, finishing 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th and 8th, respectively.

The following year, Xavier matched the Spartans' point record, placing four of the meet's top seven finishers, led by winner Adam Vess, who would go on to a fine collegiate career at Marist.

During a nine-year run from 2000 to 2009, the Guilford girls, under the direction of long-time head coach Jim Ford, won eight SCC titles, including five straight from 2004 to 2008. In 2008, Guilford dominated the race with five of its runners finishing in the top 12, on its way to setting a meet record with 29 points. Hamden's Courtney Dinnan, who would run at the University of Connecticut, won back-to-back titles in 2006 and 2007.

Cheshire won the league title in 2009, snapping Guilford's five-year skein, defeating the Indians by just five points (64-69). The 2009 girls race remains on the closest margins of victory between the winner and runner-up. Despite coming in second at the 2009 SCC race, Guilford

did capture the Class MM state title and added the State Open championship. On the boys side, Xavier also captured the State Open title, marking the only time in league history the SCC had both State Open champions.

Guilford regained its elite status winning the next three championships (2011, 2012 and 2013).

From 2008 to 2010, Daniel Hand's Sarah Cotton, who went on to run at Georgetown University, won three straight SCC individual titles, but missed the championship race during her senior year with a case of mononucleosis. For two years, Hillhouse's Kellie Davis finished as the runner-up before winning in 2011 and 2012. Davis would later attend and run at Indiana University in the Big Ten Conference.

Starting in 2010, Fairfield Prep had a four-year run with the boys individual champion. Connor Rog, who would attend the University of Virginia, won the 2010 and 2011 races, while teammate Christian Alvarado (who would attend Georgetown University) won in 2012 and 2013 (his record-setting performance). The Jesuits also won the 2013 team title.

Mercy won two straight girls titles in 2013 and 2014. In 2015, Mercy's MacKenzie Pias, who now runs at the University of Connecticut, set a SCC record with an impressive 18:29 effort. Teammate Bridgid Selfors, now running at Tulane, was second in that race.

Amity Regional won back-to-back boys titles in 2014 and 2015. In 2015, Fairfield Prep sophomore Drew Thompson won his first SCC race, and the final one to be held at Hammonasset State Park.

Following major construction at the park, and resulting state budget issues that would make Hammonasset fiscally imprudent to use, the SCC moved the championship meet to East Shore Park in New Haven for the 2016 season.

Interestingly, the Hammonasset course became a popular destination for high-level college races as well, as the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (2010) and American Athletic Conference (2013), both hosted conference championship races there. In 2012, the NCAA Division I Northeast Regional Championship meet was held at Hammonasset with Iona College and Syracuse placing first and second.

Prep's Thompson (who now attends Dartmouth) would then win the next two SCC titles at the new meet location, setting a league record with a 15:13 effort in the 2017 race. In 2017, Thompson would win the SCC, Class LL, State Open and New England individual titles, and then finished eighth at the FootLocker National Championships in San Diego, California – the best finish by a Connecticut runner.

Also deserving of recognition was Cheshire's Brendan Murray. Murray, who is now running at Yale University, finished second in the SCC championship meet in each of his four scholastic years. Murray's 15:36 time in 2017 ranks among the fastest in league history.

Also in 2017, Xavier won its second straight title, easily outdistancing runner-up Amity Regional (33 to 84). It was the largest differential between first and second place in league history. The Falcons, under the direction of head coach Chris Stonier, had a monumental 2017 campaign, winning the SCC, State Open, New England and Nike/Northeast Regional titles.

Cheshire (2016) and Guilford (2017) have won the last two SCC girls titles. The 2017 title was Guilford's 14th – further cementing the Indians' reign as the league's elite teams in any sport.

SCC Cross Country Championship Meet Facts

SCC Champions: Six different teams have won SCC boys cross country titles. Xavier has won the most boys championships (11), while Amity Regional is next with six. Fairfield Prep has three, Guilford two, and Shelton and Cheshire each have one title. On the girls side, five different schools have won league titles. Guilford has won a league-best 14 SCC titles. Cheshire is next with four, while Amity Regional (3) and Mercy (2) have won multiple league titles. Daniel Hand won its lone title in 2003.

Streaking: Xavier enters the 2018 championship meet having won the last two SCC titles. The Falcons will attempt to match their own league record of three straight league titles, achieved in 1999-2001. On the girls side, Guilford's five-year run between 2004 and 2008 remains a league standard.

We are the Champions, We are the Champions: Four times in the SCC's history has one school won both the boys and girls cross country championship. Amity Regional has done it twice (1995 and 2015) as has Guilford (2004 and 2010).

New Boys Winner in 2018: The SCC will have a new individual boys champion in 2018. Three-time winner Drew Thompson (Fairfield Prep) is now competing at Dartmouth after a spectacular scholastic career. Thompson set the SCC championship record with a 15:13 finish during the 2017 meet. Thompson followed in the footsteps of former Fairfield Prep standouts Christian Alvarado (2012 and 2013 winner) and Connor Rog (2010 and 2011 winner). Alvarado's 15:16 finish in 2013 is the fastest time at the Hammonasset State Park course.

History of success at State Level: Forty-one (27 boys, 14 girls) state championships have been won by SCC member school teams since 1994. Guilford's girls team has won 11 state titles, while Xavier boys have won eight. The Guilford boys program has won seven state titles, while the Amity Regional boys have six.

State Open: Five times a SCC boys team has won its class meet and state open – Xavier (1995, 1999, 2009), Fairfield Prep (1997) and Guilford (2004). On the girls side, Guilford won both the Class MM and State Open titles in 2002 and 2009.

Fastest Times (3.1 miles) - BOYS

15:13 Drew Thompson (Fairfield Prep), 2017 @East Shore Park
15:16 Christian Alvarado (Fairfield Prep), 2013 @Hammonasset State Park
15:36 Drew Thompson (Fairfield Prep), 2016 @East Shore Park
15:36 Brendan Murray (Cheshire), 2017 @East Shore Park
15:39 Brendan Murray (Cheshire), 2016 @East Shore Park
15:41 Jay Koloseus (Guilford), 2005 @Hammonasset State Park
15:44 Drew Thompson (Fairfield Prep), 2015 @Hammonasset State Park
15:46 Brendan Murray (Cheshire), 2015 @Hammonasset State Park
15:48 Kyle Beadette (Amity Regional), 2015 @Hammonasset State Park
15:50 Ben Siciliano (Guilford), 2015 @East Shore Park
15:51 Sean Mueller (Cheshire), 2009 @Hammonasset State Park

Fastest Times (3.1 miles) – GIRLS

18:29 Mackenzie Pias (Mercy), 2015 @Hammonasset State Park
18:32 Mackenzie Pias (Mercy), 2014 @Hammonasset State Park
18:36 Sarah Cotton (Daniel Hand), 2010 @Hammonasset State Park
18:37 Kaleigh Roberts (Mercy), 2013 @Hammonasset State Park
18:45 Amy Pleckaitis (Amity Regional), 1998 @Hammonasset State Park
18:46 Bridgid Selfors (Mercy), 2015 @Hammonasset State Park
18:52 Danae Rivers (Wilbur Cross), 2015 @Hammonasset State Park
18:53 Kellie Davis (Hillhouse), 2012 @Hammonasset State Park
18:54 Danae Rivers (Wilbur Cross), 2013 @Hammonasset State Park
18:56 Liza Grudzinski (Branford), 1997 @Hammonasset State Park

Multiple Individual Winners – BOYS

3 Drew Thompson (Fairfield Prep), 2015, 2016, 2017
2 Christian Alvarado (Fairfield Prep), 2012, 2013
Connor Rog (Fairfield Prep), 2010, 2011
Jay Koloseus (Guilford), 2004, 2005
Brian McGovern (Fairfield Prep), 1998, 2000
Steve Maheu (Xavier), 1994, 1995

Multiple Individual Winners – GIRLS

3 Sarah Cotton (Daniel Hand), 2008, 2009, 2010
2 Mackenzie Pias (Mercy), 2014, 2015
Kellie Davis (Hillhouse), 2011, 2012
Courtney Dinnan (Hamden), 2006, 2007
Orlaith Cunningham (Branford), 2002, 2003
Naihm Cunningham (Branford), 2000, 2001

Lauren Aldrich (Cheshire), 1996, 1999

Lowest Team Scores – BOYS

- 28 Amity Regional (2005), Xavier (2006)
- 30 Fairfield Prep (1998)
- 31 Fairfield Prep (1997)
- 33 Xavier (2017)
- 42 Amity Regional (2014)

Lowest Team Scores – GIRLS

- 29 Guilford (2008)
- 31 Cheshire (1996)
- 35 Guilford (2002)
- 37 Cheshire (1994)
- 39 Amity Regional (1999)