

Coach's Corner: Harriers Return to Sunset Park in 2014

Arguably, the biggest news in the upcoming high school cross country season, here in the South at least, is the return to Sunset Park. For the first time since 1988, the state meet will be held in Las Vegas, not Henderson ('90, '92), Moapa Valley ('94, '96), Indian Springs ('98), or Boulder City ('00-'12). With the expansion and renovations complete at Sunset Park, the site can now accommodate a true 5K cross country course. The Regionals and State this year will return to its birthplace. (The first high school cross country championships in Nevada were held at Sunset Park in 1972.)

Enough on that. Runners and teams, who's going to prevail this year?

Following the graduation of the greatest combined collection of female runners in Southern Nevada, ever (or since Abby Miller graduated anyway), you would expect a drop off in talent and less success for the teams affected, but that may not be the case. Teams like Centennial, Palo Verde, Coronado, Arbor View, and Green Valley just reload.

As Sydney Badger, Katie Gorczyca, Marissa Suan, Sara Dort, Logan Lucas, Taylor Lauten, Zanae Jones, and Lindy Eskin, head off to college, they will, of course, leave a void for the above teams, but not a vacuum. Depth is a big deal for cross country teams and the teams cited have it.

It's a similar situation for one boy's team in particular, Centennial. The defending state champs graduated two Legends—George Espino and Jackson Carter—as well as two other front-runners, Spencer Day and Seth Wright, but Dajour Braxton and Dominic Roberts return. Coronado loses their best runner from last year, Colin Schaefer (due to his dad's military transfer), but the Cougars have that magic word too: Depth. And Green Valley should be even stronger this year since their two best runners last year—Austin Rogers and Lenny Rubi—were both underclassmen. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's back up and look at the two Division 1 South Regions, separately, boys first and then girls.

Sunrise Boys

Green Valley should be the team to beat. Led by the aforementioned Austin Rogers and Lenny Rubi, Coach Blaine Thompson may have his best boy's team in years.

Coronado appears to be a step behind, but Nate Cromwell, Sterling Saltz, and Zach Kaufman all finished among the top ten high school runners at this year's Legends Run. Track club member Coach Mark Tondryk will be fine; he has lots of runners to choose from. There's that "D word" again.

After those two titans, look for Las Vegas, Silverado, Foothill, and Liberty to battle it out for the third ticket to State. None of them has a standout returning runner, but

they will likely have full squads. And they have veteran, experienced coaches, always a plus factor in cross country success.

Sunrise Girls

Green Valley and Coronado, who finished one-two in Sunrise in 2013, reload. The Gators lead with Ashley Sands and Sara Braverman; both finished top-15 overall at the 2014 Legends Run. The Cougars' Tristin Sanders was the number two high school finisher at the Legends Run and Ally Danlag, the top high school finisher at the LVTC Notch Run, also finished top-5 among high school girls at Legends.

As with the boys, the remaining spot for state will likely come down to the "best of the rest," probably Foothill, Basic, Valley, and Liberty if last year's results carry over.

Sunset Boys

Centennial is again the team to beat. Braxton and Roberts have state experience. I've been informed that Bryan Espino has transferred and won't be running this fall, but the Bulldogs have lots of "D"; I expect to see them at State. Palo Verde should also be very strong, returning four runners from the team that qualified for state last year, including their two top runners: Noah Landers and Andrew Goldsmith (17th and 21st at state in 2013).

As with the Sunrise girls, a quartet of teams look to fight it out for the third ticket. Past results suggest those teams will be Shadow Ridge, Arbor View, Desert Oasis, and Bishop Gorman.

Sunset Girls

Arbor View, Centennial, and Palo Verde all went to state in 2013 with Arbor View winning the title. All three teams are a lock for State again, despite graduating four Legends. It goes without saying that all three teams are well coached. Coach Tyrel Cooper graduated Zanae Jones but returns five of his top seven, including senior Madison Fletcher who was 13th at state last year. Centennial, runner-up to Arbor View in 2013, loses Sydney Badger and Katie Gorczyca but brings back sophomore Kayla Roberts, 12th at state in 2013, and four other runners who ran at state. I won't be surprised if Coach Roy Sessions works his magic and duplicates his state track success by winning it all in cross. Palo Verde will be without Marissa Suan, who heads off to UNR, but Coach Robert Davis brings back four of his top seven from 2013, who ran the Panthers to a 4th place at State, led by Samantha Reintjes who finished 20th.

Division 1A Boys

As I see it, two of the best runners in the South this fall, regardless of division, will be Chase Wood of Faith Lutheran and Garrett Meyer of SECTA. They will attempt to

lead their teams back to state. Of the two, SECTA was hit hardest by graduation, so I'm predicting Boulder City, who qualified for state in 2013 but graduated their top two runners, and SECTA will finish two-three behind the Crusaders.

Division 1A Girls

Last year it was Faith Lutheran, Cheyenne, and Desert Pines going to state. Even if Hannah Pavlov, the Crusaders best runner last year, passes up her senior year (as has been rumored), I still think Faith Lutheran is the team to beat. Faith's Jessica Scamman is the top returning runner from the South at State in 2013.

Division 3

One of the strongest girl's teams in the entire state this year will be The Meadows. The Lady Mustangs easily won the D-3 state title last year and they graduated none of their top five. This year they add Ellen Hirsberg, who was the number one middle school runner in the Las Vegas valley last fall while an eighth grader at The Meadows. Coach Charlie Bernick's two top runners, Jeneke Heerema and Baily Goose, were two-three at State in 2013 and finished fifth and eighth overall at this year's Legends, first and third among high school runners. Jeneke was a nominee for the 2014 LVTC High School Runner of the Year, the only one not a graduating senior.

The season officially begins with the Labor Day Classic at Palo Verde on August 30th. The inaugural race on the new 5K course at Sunset Park will be the Larry Burgess Las Vegas Invitational, the following Saturday, September 6th.

The LVI has an Open 5K. Entry fee is \$10. Time of the Open race is 6:45 a.m. You can enter by contacting meet director Blaine Thompson at bwthompson@interact.ccsd.net

Good luck to all runners and teams. I'll be out there sizing up this year's class of Legends.

(Phil Lawton)