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C-P Cup winners:Haddonfield boys' cross country

By GUS OSTRUM, Courier-Post Staff

Make it four in a row for the Haddonfield High School boys' cross country team -- and chalk up their latest round of success to good old-fashioned hard work.

The Bulldawgs -- winners of the Courier-Post Cup, emblematic of the No. 1 team in South Jersey -- continued as one of the state's top programs by winning their fourth straight Group 2 state championship at Holmdel Park on Nov. 14. The following week they finished a respectable fourth in the Meet of Champions.

The winning of another state title capped a solid 2009 season in which Haddonfield established itself not only as the best in South Jersey, but one of the best in the nation. The Dawgs' impressive list of achievements includes:

- Spending the entire season ranked No. 1 in the Courier-Post Top 20.
- Climbing as high as No. 2 in the state poll by njrunners.com.
- Soaring as high as No. 7 in the national rankings by milesplit.us.
- Winning their 27th South Jersey sectional championship since 1967.
- Capturing their 12th state crown in school history.
- Extending their dual-meet consecutive win streak to 122 straight triumphs, a string that stretches back to 1998 and includes a record 12 Colonial Conference crowns.
- Winning a major East Coast meet championship at the Bowdoin Invitational on Sept. 25 and posting a third-place finish in the Manhattan/Eastern States Invitational on Oct. 10.



The Haddonfield boys spent the entire season ranked No. 1 by the Courier-Post and reached as high as No. 2 in the state on njrunners.com. (Photo provided)

Again, says veteran coach Nick Baker, just chalk it up to hard work. "It's been a great ride and it all has to do with the kids we have here in Haddonfield," said Baker, whose program has won seven state titles since 2000. "They have been dedicated to running since the time most of them were in middle school. Every day they were out training hard starting in the summer and extending right through the season. They also made sure they had a lot of fun at the same time, and that's what's special about this group. They deserve their success all the way."

The Dawgs' success all started with veteran leadership, and Baker had plenty of that in seniors Jon "Boo" Vitez and Colin Baker. Vitez again stood out as one of the state's best, winning his third straight Group 2 state championship at Holmdel Park on Nov. 14 in a time of 15:57 while placing fifth overall in the Meet of Champions on Nov. 21 in 15:42. He also captured a South Jersey Group 2 sectional title and posted first place finishes in the Bowdoin Invitational and the Manhattan/Eastern States Invitational. Colin Baker, the coach's son, enjoyed another impressive season highlighted by a second place finish in the South Jersey sectionals and a fifth place showing in the Group 2 state meet.

Emerging once again -- Haddonfield's pattern over the past decade -- were a talented group of underclassmen, who carried the team as well. Juniors Ben Potts and Matt Nussbaum enjoyed break-out seasons. Nussbaum (second place, 16:30) and Potts (third, 16:32) helped Haddonfield sweep the top three spots in the Group 2 state meet, and Baker's fifth gave the Dawgs four of the top five spots in the race. Add in consistent performances from senior Ray Schlitt and David Twitchell and juniors Tim Malloy and Ethan Quanci, and the Dawgs were pretty much unstoppable in major meets. They easily won the state championship on Nov. 14 on the muddy, rainy Holmdel course with a team low of 30 points to leave runner-up Delaware Valley (124) in the dust. The same result rang true the previous week at the South Jersey sectionals on Nov. 7 when Haddonfield runners occupied seven of the top 11 spots in individual competition on the way to a convincing team title win over Delsea. "We ran incredibly well as a team in both the sectionals and states, and it showed," said Potts. "Our top guy Boo (Vitez) just ran his normal races and our pack of runners supported him all the way."

And not surprisingly, the runners themselves defer all the credit to the coaching staff -- head coach Baker and assistant coach Tom Brennan, a former Haddonfield (2000 graduate) and La Salle University runner himself.

"Coach Baker stressed to us all season that we needed to show improvement with each meet," Nussbaum said. "That's what we focused on. Just do better than the previous race. Train hard and do what you have to do to step to the next level. They really pushed us hard." Said Vitez: "The coaches have been great. Mr. Baker and Mr. Brennan really know the sport better than anyone and taught us a lot over the years about proper training techniques, race strategies and hard work."

And, not surprisingly -- even though Vitez and Colin Baker will graduate in the spring -- the Dawgs' dynasty will likely be as strong as ever once the 2010 campaign rolls around.

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