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True cross country fans know our sport is more of a team event than most outsiders realize, yet there are plenty of individual standouts as well. So, while honoring the tradition we have started at DyeStat with Interval Sessions, which introduced you to the top individuals in both track and XC, we launch Fall 2009 with "Star Squad Spotlight," giving you a chance to get to know not just the top individual runners in the country, but also the best teams.

squad | haddonfield nj boys

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by SteveU, DyeStat Senior Editor



"Tradition" is a word that can be thrown around pretty loosely at times in athletics, but for the boys cross-country program at **Haddonfield Memorial HS** in Haddonfield NJ, it has genuine meaning. The "Haddons," as **veteran scribe Ed Grant** (and surely others) calls them, have competed under **Coach Nick Baker** for 26 years, but #27 could be the best of them all. Not that there haven't been others – the **2001 squad won the NJ Meet of Champions** and put three under 16:00 on Holmdel – something that hadn't happened before and hasn't since. Baker's teams have won 11 state group championships, including last year as #1 man **Jon Vitez** won his 2nd straight individual title.

But there's been a swell of excitement about 2009 team ever since **Colin Baker** (Coach Baker's son), **Ben Potts**, and **Vitez** ran 4:09.30, 4:14.14, and 4:15.92 in either the Group 2 or MOC meets at the end of the spring. All have returned and the Haddons were ranked #6 and #7 in the country at the beginning of the season in the **DyeStat Elite FAB 50** and in **Marc Bloom's Super 25**, respectively. They scored a close victory at the **Bowdoin Park Classic** last weekend in New York, over Germantown Friends PA and Christian Brothers Academy NJ, and will rest their varsity this weekend before the Manhattan Invite Oct. 10.

Speaking to both of you, your team entered 2009 with seemingly very high expectations. We ranked you #6, nationally, and Marc Bloom ranked you #7 in his Super 25. He said that based on your athletes' top 1600 times, you may be the best "stat" unit anywhere, but that it would take cross-country chops to emerge as the state's power. Did that seem to you like a fair assessment? Are your best kids more naturally comfortable on the track, Coach, and is part of your task to transform very good milers into equally good harriers? And Jon, how would you assess how the team has done so far in summer and early fall training and the early racing?

Coach Baker: It is a very difficult job to predict how good teams will be before any racing starts and Marc does a great job previewing the XC season each year. Over the past 34 years that I have coached at Haddonfield, our distance runners have probably been as successful individually in cross country as on the track.

Jonathan (Boo) Vitez was a proven XC runner with a 12:37 at Van Cordtland, 16:05 at Holmdel and also ran 4:15 and 9:14 in the spring. Last year we had several runners (Colin Baker 4:09, Ben Potts 4:14 and Matt Nussbaum 9:34) make very significant improvements in spring track. We expect similar improvements in cross country, but it is not a given. I would not have expected them to be ranked higher because they still have to prove themselves in XC.

Jon Vitez: Being ranked nationally during the preseason was an honor, but we try not to put too much emphasis on it. We knew that we had a shot at doing something special after last track season, and we have been working hard since the summer to try and make those dreams become a reality. So far, the season has gone well. Everyone is still training hard and the race up at Bowdoin went as well as we could have wanted it to. There are some things we would have liked to do a little better, but you can't argue with starting off the season with a win.

Coach, it seems your program has had a lot of success over the years, especially for a smaller (Group 2) school faring quite well against the larger schools in the state and the region. What have you found that it takes to be able to develop a really good program, that can compete against schools of any size, in our sport? I've heard, for example, that Ray Schlitt is really more of a wrestling kid, but I imagine kids like him give you needed depth.

Coach Baker: We are a small school with a graduating class of less than 200. We have very successful sports programs at Haddonfield HS and they all take their share of the athletes. Our numbers in cross country are never very large, usually averaging 18 – 25 runners.

One of the things that have helped us a great deal is our middle school cross country team. My wife Maureen is the coach, and she does a fantastic job at getting kids out, keeping them out, and selling the sport of XC and a love for running. The kids are often involved in other sports and activities, but she is very flexible and makes it work for them. The goal of our middle school program is to expose the kids to running and provide a positive experience, so when they get to HS it is an activity they want to continue. Our top seven runners all ran in middle school and some have now run together for seven years.

The ingredients that make our program successful are: great kids, hard and smart training, supportive parents and consistent coaching. We are also fortunate to live in a small town where our runners all live within a mile of each other; this makes it very easy to get together for runs even for squads that do not drive.



We have been very fortunate to have outstanding leadership for many years. Our experienced runners show the new guys how we do things and hand down our traditions. My assistant coach, Tom Brennan, learned from the older guys when he was a freshman (Eric Bonnette, now an assistant coach at U. Penn, was our captain), then Tom passed the tradition to the next group (the 2001 MOC team) and this has continued to this present group.

Coach, can you talk about how this particular team has developed to where it is right here and now? I know Jon has been #1 for you for a few years, and that your son, Colin, had shin splint issues last fall, but after his super spring is healthy this fall. What is your take on how the pieces have come together for the group you have this season?

Coach Baker: This particular team started to develop 6 years ago. Boo Vitez, Colin Baker and Ray Schlitt were undefeated as 7th and 8th graders in middle school XC, and



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decided together they could be very successful in HS. The next year Ben Potts, Matt Nussbaum and Ethan Quanci made a commitment to running as 8th graders, and this became the nucleus of our present team.

We have a great team atmosphere and our guys really enjoy being around each other and have a lot of fun. This summer we put in more work than any team I have ever coached – not necessarily more miles, but more of the extra work: core work, hurdle mobility work, running drills and strength work..

Coach, of course one of the great all-time Haddonfield squads was the 2001 gang that put three under 16:00 at Holmdel in winning the MOC. I'm sure you've gotten questions about comparisons between the two teams. At this point, how would you match them up and compare their strengths and weaknesses? Do they inspire this team?

Coach Parker: This team is definitely deeper and has four top lead runners, where the 2001 team had three top guys and two very good young runners in 4 and 5 – who were a year away from being top guys. This year's team definitely has the potential to run faster – but the 2001 team really achieved a lot, winning the MOC and ending the season ranked #1NE and #5US. Winning the MOC that year in XC is one of my top coaching memories.

A funny story is that Colin and Boo were at the NJ Meet of Champs in 2001 when we won. Colin was interviewed as a third grader in a video of our win; the title of the interview was "The Future." Colin said, "Dad, when me and Boo get to high school we are going to break all these records."

I still have the video and it is pretty cool to look back on. This year's group is really motivated by the 2001 team and is always trying to beat their performances.

Jon, I've also heard that your brother was part of that team. Do you and he talk about that team, and this year's team? Are they an inspiration to you? Are other alums like Erin Donahue inspirational, too?

Jon Vitez: The 2001 team was a great team and they are definitely an inspiration to us, because they are the best team Haddonfield has ever had. My brother was the 4th man on that team – and let's just say he doesn't let me forget that he has won a MOC title and I have not. Tim (my brother) and I talk a lot about our team and he still comes to meets and cheers quite loudly. If you hear an obnoxious 25-year-old yelling to me that the group of five guys ahead of me is "my pack," odds are that is probably him. Alums like Erin are also inspirational because when we see her doing hurdle drills at 9 AM, while we are in school, it makes us all want to work harder and get better.

Coach, what are some of the key workouts that you do, or will do this season, that year-in and year-out are measuring sticks for success? On the other hand, are there new ideas that you've come across or come up with this year, or otherwise recently, that you are incorporating?

Coach Baker: Our weekly team mileage is about 60 mpw, but 5-6 of our top 10 guys run extra and average over 75 mpw. We travel to Philly most Sundays to do our long run at the Wissahickon Park trails – usually 10 for the new guys and up to 16+ for the vets.



So far this season, we have been doing mostly tempo runs and some repetition workouts. We are just starting to do hard interval workouts. Each year we travel to Holmdel and Belmont, two of the hardest courses anywhere, to do key tempo and interval workouts. These early season workouts help us to gauge our fitness level at an early point in the season.

We follow a lot of Jack Daniels, but I am always evaluating what we do and looking for a better way. Last year, we tried Brad Hudson's Specific-Endurance training workouts and incorporated some of Scott Christensen training ideas. I have had lunch with Mike Glavin, the Head Coach at St. Joe's University who teaches math at Haddonfield HS, for the past 20 years. He is a wealth of knowledge and a great friend. When we start talking running, the rest of the folks in the lunch room just roll their eyes because we are both pretty passionate about our sport. I constantly run workout ideas by him and take notes when he tells me what his workouts are.

Jon, getting now into October, what do you feel like it's going to take for this team to achieve their goals? Concrete things like getting that top five closer together? Developing your mental game to a higher level? What are some of the keys??

Jon Vitez: The keys to our season are training hard, staying healthy, and continuing to improve. Even though October is now upon us, the keys stay the same. Being a Group 2 school, our cross country team does not get as many guys as a Group 3 or 4 school. This year we have 18 guys, which is 6 more than last year. Obviously, we cannot afford injuries like many other schools can because our numbers are so limited. As long as we keep improving and stay healthy, we should be right in the hunt come November.

You've also had a great start individually, with very fast times at Cherokee and Baldwin, for starters. Was this what you expected out of your summer training or has it been a pleasant surprise? What kind of individual goals do you have and how do they mesh with your team goals?

Jon Vitez: I would say the start of this year has been a little surprising. Our team put in a big summer, but if someone told me in August that I would run 15:41 at Bowdoin, I wouldn't have believed them. I figured sub-16 was a definite possibility, and 15:50 would be great, but never 15:40. Individually, my only goal is to do as much as possible to help the team succeed. I want to score the least amount of points for our team, and hopefully in doing so, I can have some individual success. Our team has been working towards this year since I was a freshman, so the team always comes first.

Coach, what can you tell people from outside New Jersey about the tradition that is Haddonfield Cross-Country? What are some things about the town, the school, the program, that make it unique, or that you are proud of, and that many people may not know about?



Coach Baker: Haddonfield has been very successful for a small school over a number of years. My first year coaching track, in 1976, I coached a young man named Jim Smith who set some very high standards for our program. He went on to win the NJ MOC, was 5th in the Kinney National Race, and 2nd at the Golden West 3,000 in 8:18. Haddonfield has one of the top all time 5-man averages at Van Cortlandt Park and we are # 3 at Holmdel State Park

Haddonfield is a small town and is only about 1-½ miles wide - our entire team lives within a ½-mile from the center of town. Haddonfield

is a town that is in love with its kids and supports them in every way possible. Any team that wins a state group championship gets to ride on top of a fire truck through town; it is really cool for the kids with the police escort and parents blowing their horns.

When Erin Donahue made the Olympic Team, the town held a parade for her. We thought maybe a hundred people might come, but instead about two thousand people showed up. It was unbelievable and made me very proud, not just as one of Erin's coaches but to live in a great little community

My wife also coaches the middle school spring track team and Erin is the distance coach, which is quite a thrill for our kids. She works out on the HS track and is very quick to give advice and help to the HS kids as well.

Jon, can you add to that, and what are some of the things that keep it fresh and fun?

Jon Vitez: *One of the great parts of Haddonfield that distinguish it from other places is our unity. I have been friends with Colin since I was 5 years old, and Ray and I met soon after he moved here in 4th grade. I live 2 blocks away from Colin's house and Ben's house, and I can run to Ray's house in 5 minutes and Matt's in 10. Not only does this allow for great friendships, but it also allows for great training. I don't remember the last time I went for a run by myself. Any time you need motivation to run, you just think of your teammates and call one of them up to go for a run.*

With such big goals constantly on our minds, we make sure to take days to have fun and keep everyone loose. Most recently, we took a Friday easy and ended up having an acorn fight that left several of us with welts and left Ray with scars on his stomach. Training hard is very important, but you need to realize at times that you are still kids and you should enjoy it while you can. At Haddonfield, we try to mix hard training with fun to keep everyone happy.

Photos (from top): 1. Coach Baker (photo submitted); 2. the Haddonfield pack, with Matt Nussbaum, Colin Baker, and Ben Potts (photo by John Napolitan); 3. Jon Vitez leading a pack at the Cherokee Challenge (photo by John Napolitan); 4. The top seven (photo by John Napolitan).



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