

CROSS COUNTRY

Engineering a fast family *Hutch-Tech boys start season quickly after great summer*

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Hutch-Tech's cross country team consists of, left to right, coach Dave Sardo, Alex Simon, Donte Ettipio, Michael McClurkin, Robert Taylor, William Serediuk and volunteer assistant Fran Emmerling.

Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

There was a day this summer, one of many such days, when Hutch-Tech's Dave Sardo was driving a car loaded with his cross country runners to a park for training runs. Some of the younger kids in the back teased each other as the chattering car rolled along, and senior Rob Taylor, sitting in the passenger seat listening to it all, turned and said to Sardo, "It's a family, coach." And it's one fast family.

A summer spent making early morning road trips to area parks has already begun to pay off for the Engineers. Hutch-Tech was the top area finisher at this past weekend's West Seneca Invitational, finishing second in the large school division to Section V power Pittsford-Sutherland.

Tech wasn't a part of the Western New York preseason poll, but now the two time defending Buffalo Public Schools are at No. 5 among large schools.

"It was definitely a great way to start off," said Taylor, who was seventh at West Seneca in 17:11.8. "We had a good time on top of it, too. It brought us even closer together — if that's even possible."

Taylor is the team's only senior and is the defending All High champion, the kind of credentials that would make him one of the few runners who would usually be interested in running along with Sardo in serious summer workouts. But this group, Sardo says, was different.

"I've always done it some shape or form, but these guys really latched on," said Sardo, a Hutch-Tech graduate. "If you get two or three, that's pretty good. These five wanted to go day-in, day-out — dragging themselves in, yawning early in the morning. But by the end of the summer, we were running races and seeing stunning times. They asked me for tougher workouts. They did it willingly. They want to run in college, they want people to know that city kids can run."

So the group — which also includes juniors Alex Simon (17:20.5, ninth at West Seneca) and Michael McClurkin (11th, 17:32) and sophomores William Cerediuk (17th, 18:13.40) and Donte Ettipio (19th, 18:24.7) — would meet up in the morning at Delaware Park and hit the road to Stiglmeier Park in Cheektowaga, or Chestnut Ridge in Orchard Park.

“I saw those guys more than I saw my wife,” Sardo said.

And with all the running — and all the driving — eventually something special started to happen, the something special that Taylor noticed that day from the front seat.

“It just became one of those things — like a second family kind of thing,” said Taylor. “It can’t be described in words. The whole experience, you feel it through your body and heart. It’s just like that [a family]. I have little sister and brothers, and that’s what it’s like — we’re there for each other through thick and thin.”

That’s what Sardo has seen as well.

“They’re all brothers,” said the coach. “Rob is the big brother . . . Donte is the smart aleck little brother. Alex is the silent one; he just straps them on and goes. Billy is the eager younger brother, he’s the talker.

“Mike is the historian. He knows his running. He called me to tell me a world record was set the other day. ‘Coach, did you know? There was a world record.’ ”

The Hutch-Tech group also includes a very wise uncle in volunteer assistant Fran Emmerling, a longtime runner and marathoner who is well known in local running circles. Sardo asked him if he was interested in helping out — partly because he could use a hand coaching a total of 45 kids on the team.

“He’s all about running,” said Sardo. “He’s showed us through Chestnut Ridge — he’s like the mayor out there and he knows the place like the back of his hand. He’s still super fit, super enthusiastic and the kids love him.”

“They wanted to run, and myself and Dave helped them run — it just snowballed,” said Emmerling, who coached at Maryvale early in the 2000s. “These boys are special. To me you don’t see this often. The five boys right now are a nucleus, they work out together, and they want to win. It’s very exciting. And it’s renewed my spirit for running.”

Hutch-Tech heads to Grand Island for the Niagara Frontier Officials meet on Saturday and will also participate at McQuaid and Alden.

“We want to make the states as a team,” said Taylor, who missed a trip to states in Class A by two spots last year. “We want to prove to the suburbs that we can so do something.”

Not that they don’t already have something to remember.

“I’ll be 70 in a rocking chair and I’ll be saying, ‘Hey, I was running when I was 17, and I still remember all the nicknames and everything,’ ” said Taylor. “It’ll be something we never forget.”

And Taylor already knows who to thank. “Coach Sardo has done so much for us, helped us out in so many ways,” he said. “He’s paid for jerseys. Last year sectionals were at Bemus Point [at Long Point State Park on the Southern Tier] and he drove us down there and back the day before sectionals so we could get a run there. He’s done all these little things, it’s amazing.

“The only way we have to thank him is to go to states.”

Around the course

The **East Aurora** girls are ranked 15th in the country by The Harrier magazine — a rating that pits teams from all levels against each other. The defending Class B state champs are also fourth overall in the dyestat.com rankings for New York, which include schools of all sizes. New York is such a talented cross country region that it is one of nine divisions ranked by Dyestat.com — all the others include groups of states. Among an outstanding group of returning runners for EA are seniors Catharine Lusardi and Jenna Hulton.

Defending Class AA champion Kailey Sullivan and sister Emily will help **West Seneca West** be a power again on the state level for girls. Class A runner-up Brenna Symoniak of **Amherst** is a junior. **Lockport** will be strong again after winning the Niagara Frontier League. Class C champion Samantha Kopp is back for her junior year at **Franklinville**.

Defending Class A champion Joe Whelan, a junior at **Hamburg**, was Section VI’s fastest competitor at the state meet last year, finishing fourth in the Class A race. The **Clarence** boys return everyone from the AA champions. The **Fredonia** boys will again try and chase down East Aurora in Class B, while **Wilson** has nearly all of its components back from last year’s Class C title team. **Canisius** and **Nardin** are expected to lead the Catholic pack.

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