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## **Cross Country Kicks Off With Red Dragons Invitational**

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ELLERY - About 600 area cross country runners from throughout the Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Athletic Association will be competing in the third annual Red Dragon Invitational on Saturday at Long Point State Park.

It's an event that showcases one of the best courses in Western New York, according to race director Robert Rappole.

"It's beautiful," said Rappole, who also serves as the Maple Grove coach. "The kids just love the course. It's not the most spectator-friendly, because once they leave that first mile, they're gone. But you do get to see that last mile and you do get to see the finish."

It figures to be quite a finish, indeed, on the 3.1-mile course.

Defending champion Caroline Benson of Maple Grove claimed last year's girls race in 19:24.30 to help the Lady Red Dragons to the team title.

Benson finished just ahead of Falconer's Shannon Murphy (19:26.40). On Saturday, they'll be challenged by, among others, Kirsten Holmberg of Falconer, who placed third last year; Emily Steves of Gowanda; Holly Elliason of Sherman-Clymer; Lauren Reyda of Fredonia; and Katie Saff of Falconer.

Kevin Brown of Gowanda finished second in last year's boys race with a time of 17:04, more than 40 seconds behind teammate Cliff Nielson, and is among the favorites on Saturday. Other boys to watch are Dakota Spencer of Olean, Maple Grove's Corey Wefing, Dunkirk's Alex Gonzales and Fredonia's Chaz Manzino. Spencer was fourth in 2009, Wefing was fifth, Gonzales sixth and Manzino 10th. Fredonia won the boys teams title while Gowanda was second.

"One of the great things is that the whole park is gravel," Rappole said. "Even when it's sloppy, it's better than 90 percent of the courses. ... The venue itself, well, the kids are running on a beautiful trail through the woods. It's also a consistent course. One of the things the CCAA loves is the kids really have a barometer on what they've done during the season."

Saturday's invitational kicks off the CCAA cross country campaign, which will end with its championship meet on the same course at the end of October.

Among the league's top teams, Rappole said, are Fredonia, Olean, Gowanda and Maple Grove, for the boys, and Maple Grove, Fredonia, Falconer and Jamestown for the girls.

Following is Saturday's schedule: 9 a.m., open race; 9:30 a.m., coaches meeting; 9:45 a.m., girls varsity race; and 12:30 p.m., boys varsity race. In between the varsity races, the junior varsity and modified races will also be held.