

Top Guns

No. 1 MG Girls Run To History; Red Raiders Crack State Rankings

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Three times a week, Robert Rappole meets John Zuroski, Pat Green and John Marsh at Long Point State Park where they embark on a run that takes them to Bemus Point and back.

Rain or shine.

"We just run together and talk about everything," Rappole said.

Among the items discussed early Tuesday morning was the Maple Grove High School girls cross country team and its performance at the McQuaid Invitational in Rochester last Saturday.

Led by seventh-grader Megan Marsh and freshman Caroline Benson, who finished in fifth and seventh place respectively, the Lady Red Dragons won the small-school seeded race to become the first Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Athletic Association team to ever accomplish such a feat at McQuaid.

"It's just unbelievable," said Rappole, Maple Grove's coach. "We lost three of our top five from last year."

The Lady Red Dragons haven't missed a beat, though.

The top-ranked Class D team in the state, the girls - captained by junior Katelyn Benson - have picked up where they left off last year.

"Our girls have really trained well this summer and this fall," Rappole said. "Megan Marsh and Hope Pietrocarlo, our two seventh-graders, I can't take any credit for at all. They're gifts from God. They are two diamonds, just terrific competitors and terrific kids."

But it's clear that Rappole feels the same way about the rest of his roster which includes Tomasina Lamper, Stephanie Krempa, Taylor Norris, Abby Sirwatka, Kathleen Carolus and Dominique DelCalzo.

"I just keep telling them that they have a target on their back," he said. "Last year was easy. They were ranked fourth, then third, then second. Now that they're No. 1, they have no place to go."

People have been taking notice.

After winning the small-school seeded race at McQuaid, the team stood together on a stage where it received the championship plaque. Upon leaving the stage, Bill Wende, representing the website Section6Runs, posed them for a photo. The way things are going, the Lady Red Dragons can expect more Kodak moments in the coming weeks.

"I just look at these little peanuts and think, 'Oh, boy,'" Rappole said. "My job is not to over-train them, get them sick or have them get a stress fracture. Truthfully, it's a balancing act."

But Rappole knows all about juggling.

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Each August, he and his wife Barb open their Findley Lake summer home to members of Maple Grove's boys and girls teams.

"We have 32 living with us for a week," Rappole said.

The girls live upstairs in the main house, while the boys stay in the guest house nearby. Parents of the kids help out, including with meal preparation.

"It's a hoot, we really have fun," Rappole said.

Still, there is an ulterior motive, which is preparing for the season. During their seven-day stay at Camp Rappole, the kids arise early to run at 6:30 a.m. At midday, they take a dip in Findley Lake where they get in a water workout and then, later in the afternoon, they take another run. The week-long adventure concludes with a Saturday run on the Overland Trail, from Sherman to the state line. A third of the team - six boys and six girls - completed the 13 miles.

"My son Jesse (Maple Grove Class of 2001) and I started making that run from the time he was in seventh grade," Rappole said. "On Father's Day, my kids know they're going to have to run the Overland Trail with me. That's one of the givens."

Speaking of "givens," the Maple Grove boys team is also performing quite well.

At McQuaid, the ninth-ranked Red Dragons placed third in the unseeded race and were led by freshman Corey Wefing, who finished fourth.

"He's amazing," Rappole said. "He is in a different league."

Teammate Nick Zuroski, a talented sophomore, placed 13th. The rest of the varsity squad includes senior Brent Penhollow, and sophomores Peter Cala, Colin Green and Matt Nelson.

Just like the girls, the Maple Grove boys came home from Rochester with a plaque to add to the school's bulging trophy case.

No doubt, the added hardware the boys earned was also part of Rappole's conversation with his running buddies as they pounded the pavement between Long Point and Bemus Point this week.

In the cross country polls, the Maple Grove girls remain No. 1 in Class D while the Maple Grove boys are No. 9. Other area ranked girls teams are Falconer and Fredonia, No. 12 and No. 13 respectively, in Class C, and Randolph, No. 14 in Class D.

Fredonia is No. 7 and Gowanda No. 11 in the boys Class C cross country poll.