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CROSS COUNTRY

It's a Mom and Pop operation at East Aurora

McLaughlins lead Blue Devils

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Mark Mulville/Buffalo News
The husband and wife coaching team of Walt and Marty McLaughlin, center, has built a strong program at East Aurora.



John Hickey/Buffalo News
East Aurora cross country runners Tara O'Connor, left,

East Aurora coach Walt McLaughlin and his wife, assistant coach Marty, have five children under the age of 10.

"And 36 teenagers," says Marty.

That would be the number of varsity runners at East Aurora, home of one big happy cross country family.

In a program in which the McLaughlins are nicknamed "Coach Dad" and "Coach Mom," there are another 36 "kids" running modified cross country. Some varsity runners on the girls team, who have been known to have a Sunday bike-ride stop at the McLaughlins' house turn into a three-hour visit, can rattle off the names of all of the McLaughlin kids: Marta (10 years old), Matthew (9), Molly (7), Maggie (4) and Megan (2).

"We have our own team," jokes Marty.

East Aurora's teams have been getting bigger and bigger, and better and better, since Walt and Marty began coaching six years ago.

The defending Class B state champion girls team is not only ranked first in Western New York and first in the state Class B poll, this year it has earned national recognition in the Nike Team Nationals poll as the No. 7 team in the Northeast.

Both teams - the boys are ranked second in Western New York - are coming off dominating Division III-sweeping performances at the ECIC championships last weekend. At Friday's Section VI Championships at Long Point State Park in Bemus Point, the girls are huge favorites to win their sixth straight title while the defending champion boys will battle top-ranked Fredonia for the crown behind four-time state

and Marla Kelley work out at practice on school grounds. participant Ryan O'Connor.

"We've had just some terrific athletes and great parental support," said Walt. "Last year, the girls kind of figured out what running is all about, doing it year-round and finding out how good they can be. Every year is a steppingstone."

Two successful running careers ran into each other at Edinboro (Pa.) University, where Walt, an East Aurora native, met Marty (who competed in the 1992 Olympic trials in the 800 meters). Walt coached at Beaver River in the Adirondacks, where he built a nationally ranked program that won boys and girls state titles in 1998. Now he and Marty have built a state power in his hometown.

But how? In a sport in which some participants have been known to wear a T-shirt that reads, "Our sport is your sport's punishment," how does EA get such great participation, and such great results?

"There's no secret to it," Marty said. "It's just to work hard. It takes a certain type of mind-set, and kids have to believe, but they go do all the work. We try to make it fun."

At an East Aurora practice, while Walt leads the varsity teams on specific training circuits meandering around field hockey and soccer fields, Marty oversees the younger modified group in a spirited relay race around the track: Modified runners enthusiastically retrieve sticks from the nearby woods to use for batons, and then they scream and root each other on through what amounts to a 20-minute workout.

"In other sports and in physical education programs across the country, it's, "You did something bad. Go run," " said Walt. "And it shouldn't be like that. You have to promote it and be enthusiastic about running and teach kids how to run, run efficiently, and have fun doing it."

The runners rave about the coaches, who just bounce the credit back to the hard work the runners put in.

"Any runner will tell you: You can't be good without hard work," said O'Connor, EA's big brother of sorts, the senior captain on a boys team consisting of mostly sophomores. "Talent will only get you so far. You have to rely on hard work and coaching. Our coaches prepare us for the races that matter, to run well at the end of the year. That's what we train to do."

Great cross country teams are almost equal parts quantity and quality, and EA's girls showed why they are heavy in both categories at the Sept. 30 McQuaid Invitational, a huge event in Rochester known for its multitude of races. The girls did their usual thing by winning their race, with Catherine Lusardi (the junior also won the Southern Tier Invitational and the ECICs) finishing first, followed by teammates Jenna Hulton, Kirsten Weberg, Marla Kelley (the only senior), Tara O'Connor and Paige Pelton.

When a JV race wasn't listed, Walt asked if he could run his second team in one of McQuaid's other varsity races. East Aurora won that one, *too*, behind Alice Coughlin, Catherine Phillips, Ashley Beyer, Emily Crawford (whose sister Erin is also on the team) and Katie Mosser. That's right: What amounted to EA's JV team came in first in a field of more than 20 varsity programs from throughout the state.

The next few weeks are what EA has been running for all year: the sectionals, followed by the states and the Federation meet. Strong finishes by the girls the next few weeks could move them up the Nike poll, where the top two teams in each of six regions earn trips to the national championship meet (Dec. 2 at Portland, Ore.) while the third and fourth teams are eligible for wild-card selection.

"It doesn't matter what level you're at, we want you to improve through the season," said Walt. "We haven't figured it all out - we're just trying to scratch the surface. It's a cycle to keep trying to get better every year."

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