

# **Introduction to Minnesota High School Boys Cross Country**

by John "Statman" Larsen

## **Basics**

High School cross country is a sport where athletes race on an outdoor, natural terrain course, usually on a school's grounds, on a golf course, or in a park area. The most important physical characteristic in the sport is endurance. But strength and speed are also developed through training. And mental conditioning is imperative for training and racing.

Athletes race both for individual honors and as a member of their school. The equipment needed is minimal; quality running shoes and a uniform provided by the team for the runners; for the course and race, lines and/or markers to identify the course and a timing system are the main needs.

Rules are relatively straightforward and simple. In Minnesota, the race distance is usually 5000 meters (3.1 miles), although some races are shorter, particularly for new runners or middle school runners. It is a popular sport; last year, approximately 6,250 boys participated in high school cross country in Minnesota, which is about 5% of the male student body in the state.

The schools are divided into two classes – class AA, which includes schools with enrollments generally exceeding 600, and class A, which includes the smaller schools. The typical class AA school has 30 to 35 runners on their team.

## **Meets**

For an individual meet, the host school is expected to provide maps of the course to each team. Historically, some meets, called dual meets, involved only two schools. Today, dual meets are rarely found in Minnesota. More typically, regular season meets invite anywhere from about 4 to about 40 teams and are called invitationals. These invitationals are contested from late August until mid-October. From mid-October through the first week of December is the championship season. All teams and individuals compete in both the conference and section championships.

The section championship is used as the qualifying race for the state championship. In the section championship, the top two varsity teams and the top eight individuals from the rest of the field qualify to compete in the state championship meet.

A typical meet hosts both boys and girls races, and for each sex, a junior varsity and a varsity race is held. In some smaller meets, junior varsity and varsity are combined into a single race. On the other hand, in some of the larger invitationals, the junior varsity runners are divided into two separate races, with the extra race being referred to as the "C race".

In almost all meets, the C race, if held, is contested first, followed by the junior varsity race, while the varsity race is contested last. Meets are cancelled or delayed only if lightning is seen in the area or for the most extreme weather conditions. Rain, snow, wind, cold, or heat are just considered part of the challenge. Both runners and spectators should be prepared for conditions.

As a spectator, come prepared to move around the course. Most courses are designed to allow spectators to move around and see several portions of the race with fairly minimal effort. Consult a course map if possible to pick out good places to observe and cheer from. Make sure you do not get in the way of runners on the course, and be respectful of the host facility (for example, stay off of the greens if the race is run on a golf course).

One rule spectators should be aware of is that it is illegal to run alongside a competitor to pace or encourage him.

## **Individual Competition**

The concept is simple – the first runner to legally traverse the entire course is the winner of the race.

Barring a malfunction of the timing system, all runners who finish are assigned a place and a time. Results are announced and usually physically posted on a results board at the end of each meet. They are also generally posted on John Marshall's team website ([www.johnmarshallrockets.org](http://www.johnmarshallrockets.org)) as soon as possible.

There are also several web sites that aggregate results from high school races in Minnesota – [Mile Split](#) is one of these sites. Like many other such sites, milesplit allows each team to have a page that is managed by that team. Volunteers associated with the John Marshall program actively administer the team's page on this site. Other sites that aggregate Minnesota high school cross country results include:

[MN Cross Country Hub](#)

[Raceberry Jam](#)

[Athletic.net](#)

[Dystat](#)

Additionally, many results can be found at [Wayzata Results](#), which is the site of a company that provides the timing services for many of the meets in southeast Minnesota.

The time it takes to run a given course can vary considerably, based upon the terrain, running surface, weather conditions, race preparation, and the changing level of fitness as the season progresses. The fastest runners run in the low 15 minute range by the end of the season. The table below shows the percent of participants in Minnesota who had a best time over a 5000 meter course in 2014 that met the standard shown:

## **Team Competition**

Each team designates seven runners to be on the varsity team. All other runners are on the junior varsity team, although for some races, the junior varsity squad is further divided into junior varsity and C teams. When this happens, the junior varsity team is composed of 9 to 12 runners, while the C team consists of all remaining runners.

In each race, each team is awarded the points corresponding to each runner's place –1 point for first, 2 points for second, and so forth. The points are summed up for the first five finishers for each team. The team with the lowest total score wins. In the case of a tie, the sixth place finishers for each of the tied teams are compared.

As a spectator, it is often difficult to know how your team is doing as the race progresses. If you know the number of teams that are competing, an easy way to get a good idea of how the team race is shaping up is to look at the first couple of groups of runners equal to the number of teams.

For example, if there are 12 teams in a competition, an average team might be expected to have one runner among the first 12 runners, another among the second 12 runners, and so forth. As the first twelve runners go by, note how many are on your team, and note any teams with multiple runners in the first group. Do the same for the second group of twelve runners. Usually, these first two groups will give you at least a pretty good idea of what teams are doing well, and how John Marshall's team is doing.

Another alternative is to simply compare two teams by noting the relative positions of each team's runners. This would entail comparing each team's first runner against each other, then their second runners, on down to their fifth. If one team wins every individual matchup, they will beat the opponent in the team competition. If it is a 4 to 1 split, the team with 4 wins is likely to win the team competition. A 3 to 2 split means they are likely to be close in the team competition.

## **Additional Resources**

[Minnesota State High School League](#) – This is the website of the Minnesota State High School League, the governing body of Minnesota high school sports. It has a wealth of information on high school sports rules, what class and section each school is assigned to for each sport, administrators of each section, results of section and state meets, and so forth.

[Big 9 Conference](#) – This is the website of the Big Nine Conference. It is the official source of schedule information for schools in the conference.