

High School Sports

Senior's breakthrough day sets winning pace for surging Bangor boys XC team

Gabe Coffey has set an impressive pace this season for the Bangor High School cross-country team. The senior's victory in the Maine Cross Country Festival of Champions on Saturday helped legitimize his status as one of the state's top runners and the Rams' potential to challenge for regional and state championships.

By **Ernie Clark**, BDN Staff • October 3, 2018 1:00 am

BANGOR, Maine — Gabe Coffey made his long-distance running debut in one of the area's most popular road races.

Granted, at 1.8 miles the annual Walter Hunt Memorial Fourth of July 3K from Brewer to downtown Bangor isn't an endurance test — for most.

But Coffey was only 4 years old at the time.

“It’s supposed to be the fastest race anywhere because it’s all downhill,” he recalled this week, “but as a 4-year-old that was hard.”

Coffey was not deterred by that early memory.

Now a senior at Bangor High School, he’s not only leading the cross-country team into contention for postseason success, but he’s also coming off an individual victory Saturday at the state’s biggest meet, the 17th Maine Cross Country Festival of Champions in Belfast.



Gabor Degre | BDN

Gabe Coffey is shown during a practice run on Monday afternoon at Bangor High School. The senior has set an impressive pace this season for the Bangor cross-country team, which has emerged as a challenger for regional and state championships.

Coffey bested a field of 850 boys runners from Maine and beyond with a time of 15 minutes, 54.51 seconds, on the 3.1-mile the Troy A. Howard Middle School course. John Auer of Falmouth was second, nearly eight seconds back (16:02.31), followed by Will Shaughnessy of Brunswick (16:04.76) and Tristram Coffin of Scarborough (16:06.22).

“That specific race I’ve been watching since fifth or sixth grade with my dad,”

Coffey said. “I’ve watched some really great runners — I definitely don’t put myself in the same class as them, they’re kind of like my idols — but it’s really special for me to win it.”

Coffey’s victory, which helped Bangor finish second behind Kennebec Valley Athletic Conference rival Brunswick in the boys team standings, was marked by a personal attention to detail that has defined all aspects of his training in recent years.

Coffey ran a 5:07 per mile pace, which left him trailing several runners after the first mile. But he was poised to make his move past a group of leaders that included Joe O’Rourke and Conor Murphy, teammates at Classical High School in Providence, Rhode Island.

“I was intentionally running a conservative race knowing there was a hill right after the first mile,” said Coffey, who finished 12th in the 2017 race. “I sat back, and then at around 2 miles I caught up to the out-of-state guys, kind of pulling the Maine contingent along, and there’s a hill after 2 miles and I accelerated up the hill and slowly pulled away.”




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Bangor High School cross-country coach Roger Huber.

It was a signature victory for Coffey, but how he won was not a surprise to second-year Bangor cross-country coach Roger Huber.

“Gabe is incredibly thoughtful as a runner,” he said. “He’s patient. He doesn’t get anxious. He knows what he’s doing going into a race, and he’s very good about sticking to his plan.”

That planning is not confined to races, as Coffey routinely spends up to three hours a day on his training regimen.

“I started off freshman  ek, nothing extreme,” he said. “Now in my senior year I’m running up to 80 miles a week, and the majority of my training stresses high-aerobic activity and trying to do the little things to prevent injury — strides, mobility work, core and stretching.”

While Coffey’s training schedule doesn’t always match up with his teammates, his leadership by example is impossible to ignore.

“Gabe is an exceptional model of what it looks like to train hard,” Huber said. “We train Gabe sort of differently from the rest because of his training age — his commitment has been so far and above the others for the last couple of years.

“The team looks up to Gabe. He’s not in any sense a diva; they look at him and

know what he's bringing to the team. There's a good understanding that we can't do it without Gabe, but Gabe can't do it alone, either.”

That understanding, bolstered by a summer running program instituted by Huber during the most recent offseason, has contributed to the improvement that emerged at the Festival of Champions. A youthful Bangor team — Coffey and Dwight Knightly are the lone seniors among the top seven — served notice of its intent to challenge the likes of Brunswick and Hampden Academy for the KVAC title and vie later this month for **the program's first Class A regional championship since 2011.**

“It was a breakthrough day for the team,” Coffey said.

While Knightly (19th place) and sophomores Gordon Doore (24th) and Gavin Sychterz (76th) also figured prominently into Bangor's scoring, the team received perhaps its biggest lift from Dan McCarthy, who won the FOC freshman boys race in 16:56.08 and whose time was good for 17th place overall.

“That was probably the most impressive performance of the day,” Coffey said.

What made the team finish even more of a breakthrough was that Bangor is gearing its training more toward the postseason.

“We’ve only just begun race-specific training, though knew we were going to be there, so we wanted to test ourselves to see where we were at this point,” Huber said.

It wasn’t until after the race that the runners got that answer.

“As [a race official] read down the results and got to the top 10 [teams], the kids started paying attention,” Huber said. “Then they got to No. 4 and No. 3 and as they asked those teams to come up and get their plaques and it still wasn’t Bangor, the kids really started looking around.

“They were surprised.”

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