

RUNNING HIGH SCHOOL CROSS-COUNTRY, THE SOUTHWEST WAY

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Running High School Cross-Country, The Southwest Way
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I want to use this to emphasize, explain, or tell about the continued long-term success of the cross-country team at Minneapolis Southwest High School.

From the early 1940's through 1980, Southwest high school DOMINATED the high school cross-country scene in Minnesota. The boy's teams (girls didn't start until the 1970's) made it to the state meet every year except 3 from the inception of the state meet until 1980. That's 38 years, 35 times at the state meet! But just making it to the state meet was not good enough, we also won the state title 18 times in that time span, finishing no worse than 6th place, which happened only two times. The other non-winning places were 2nd, 3rd or 4th.

People talk about dynasties. I think a 38 year run counts as a dynasty. Granted, the first few years anyone who wanted to, could run in the state meet. But around 1954, it became mandatory to qualify through a region meet. Southwest didn't miss a beat.

The Halley Years

Coach Al Halley coached the Southwest High School Cross-Country team from the beginning, 1943, through the 1970 Season. That's 28 years as head coach. In 27 of those years, Southwest competed in the Minnesota State Cross Country Championships. Here is a summary of the results:

Northrop Field, University of Minnesota (1.5 miles)

1943: Southwest – 3rd. 1st - Duluth Central, 2nd - St. Paul Johnson

Lake Nokomis Park (1.8 miles)

1944: SW – 4th. 1st - Mpls. Roosevelt, 2nd - Duluth Central

1945: SW – 4th. 1st - Duluth Central, 2nd - Worthington

1946: SW – 1st! First of many state titles!

1947: SW – 1st.

1948: SW – 1st.

1949: SW – 2nd. 1st - Duluth Central

1950: SW – 1st.

1951: SW – 2nd. 1st - Duluth Central

1952: SW – 1st.

1953: SW – 1st.

1954: SW – 1st.

As you can see, after a little bit of a slow start, Southwest won 7 of 9 state meets starting in 1946, finishing second in the other 2. I am also breaking this up here because of a couple of events. Notice Southwest was on a roll, winning 3 in a row. The year 1954 was the last year that you did not have to qualify for the state meet. Any public-school team that wanted to run in the meet, could do so. Starting in 1955, there were qualifying region meets that had to be run in order to qualify for the state meet. Usually 2 teams came out of these meets, but there have been as many as 4, and as few as one to qualify from these region meets.

Starting in 1955, Southwest had their two worst finishes in the state meet; 6th in 1955, and 6th the next year, 1956. Also, a big event happened in 1955. I was born on October 18th of that year!

Beginning in 1957, Southwest had a phenomenal run. From 1957, through to the end of Coach Halley's tenure, 1970, Southwest finished no worse than 3rd, only doing that once. Otherwise, it was either champion or runner up each year for the Southwest harriers. We missed the state meet in 1967. This was somewhat significant as it was the first time ever that a Southwest team did not participate in the state cross country meet. Some more results:

1957: SW – 2nd.

1958: SW – 3rd.

1959: SW – 1st.

1960: SW – 2nd.

1961: SW – 2nd.

1962: SW – 1st.

1963: SW – 1st.

Here the meet changed to the University of Minnesota Golf Course. The distance changed to 2 miles.

1964: SW – 1st.

1965: SW – 1st.

1966: SW – 2nd.

1968: SW – 2nd.

University of Minnesota Golf Course (3 miles)

1969: SW – 1st.

1970: SW – 1st.

The final tally for Coach Halley was: 14 State Championships, 7 runner-sup, 2 third places, 2 fourth places, and 2 sixth places. In other words, half of ALL the state meets run to this point in time, were won by Southwest. Three fourths of them ended with Southwest in either first or second place. That sounds very much like a dominant team and program. In his 28 years, Coach Halley had 2 win streaks of 3 state titles in a row, and one of 4 in a row. All the individuals on the varsity versions of the 4 state titles in a row, from 1962 – 1965, are now enshrined in the Southwest High School Athletic Hall of Fame. What Coach Halley didn't know when he retired in 1970, was his last 2 state titles started a string of 5 in a row, from 1969 – 1973. All of these runners, (yours truly included!) were enshrined into the Hall of Fame in 2015.

No school in the history of Minnesota High School Cross-country has won 5 state titles in a row, other than Southwest. There have been 3 schools that have won 4 in a row; Burnsville High School, 1976 – 1979; Minneapolis South High School, 1988 – 1991; and Staples – Motley High School, 1996 – 1999. Also, the aforementioned 4 in a row by Southwest from 1962 – 1965. There have been numerous 3-year streaks, but only the one 5-year streak. There also has not been the sustained dominance by one school over a lengthy period of time that is anywhere close to the 38-year run by Southwest.

Needless to say, to have a sustained run like this, you have to have a consistent source of good runners that perform at a high level. Coach Halley, and then Coach Hoisington after him, were tremendous in the development of these runners. We will get into this in more detail later as to how these coaches developed such good runners over such a long period of time. Here is a list of some of the outstanding runners that ran for Coach Halley:

1946 – Clarence Johnson, State Champion.

1947 – Jim Hancock, State runner-up.

1948 – Jim Hancock, State Champion.

1950 – Bill Phillips, State Champion.

1953 – Jerry McNeal, State runner-up.

1955, 1956 – Wayne Sullwold, Two – time State Champion.

1959 – Bob Newman, State Champion.

1962 – Bob Wiegel, State Champion.

So, Coach Halley coached 6 individual state champions. Seven if you count Wayne Sullwold twice. What you don't see here, is the depth required to maintain the high level of achievement as a team, year-in,

and year-out. To be this consistent, this good, you must have the depth through your 6th and 7th runners. As I learned during my 30+ coaching years, just having 2 or 3 good runners up front isn't good enough to win large meets, such as the state meet or large invitationals. You must be strong right on through number 5, 6, and 7 runners. In other words, you must convince the runners down the line that they are just as important, in fact just as critical, as the runners up front. That they need to buy into the plan and put in the time necessary to be successful. My son asked me once what I meant by "putting in the time". This will be discussed later as well. The short answer is putting in your summer miles in an appropriate way to move you forward to the next level.

Following Coach Halley's retirement after the 1970 season, someone had to replace him. The athletic director at the time was Myers Peterson. He looked no further than the B-Squad coach, Bob Hoisington. Coach Hoisington once told me that after Coach Halley left, Myers Peterson approached him, and asked him this question.

"So, do you want the hot seat?" Coach Hoisington's response was a simple, "hell yes!"

Coach Hoisington was my coach in 1970 as I was a member of the B-Squad Cross-country team that year. The way the structure was set up, Coach Halley had the 7 Varsity and 7 JV runners, everybody else ran for Coach Hoisington. So, Halley had all the really good, experienced runners, Hoisington had all the rest. Coach Hoisington had a very important job in that he had to develop those young, inexperienced runners into the more experienced ones that would end up running for Halley. Now, he would have the whole bunch under his tutelage. He would have to develop the young ones and coach the older, more experienced ones himself. As you will see, he did this quite well.