

Oct. 9 JoJo's/Fish4Scores.com Athlete of the Week

As Bauerle and Williams lead the way, 'Stars girls get long awaited victory

By Rich Fisher

Fish4Scores.com

Oct. 9: It had been so long since the Nottingham High girls' cross country team won a dual meet, no one seemed to remember when it happened last.

But it's now a moot point, as it's easy to answer that question after this week.

The day of Oct. 4, 2011 will go down as a great one for the Northstars, who defeated Steinert by one point this past Tuesday to give the program it's first win in, well, whenever.

For their effort, the five girls who comprised the team score are the JoJo's *Tavern/Fish4Scores.com Athlete(s) of the Week* for the week ending Oct. 8. It made for an awesome week for coach "Irish" Mike Walsh (outside of his Yankees), as his wife gave birth to the couple's first son later in the week.

"My first year, our only goal was to get the numbers up," said Walsh, now in his third year. "It was embarrassing to be Group III and not have a full team. My first year we had five, but only three were ready to run a race. I think we ran five, like two or three times.

"This year, with the help of coach (Melissa "Shop 'N Bag) Foley, we got some more girls out for the distance program in the spring. We got it up to about 10 girls and about six who were ready to compete."

The five scorers for Nottingham in Tuesday's victory were seniors Melissa Bauerle, Sam Williams and Sarah Hackman, junior Rosa Colon and sophomore Theresa Henry.

The two girls who could appreciate that day the most are Williams and Bauerle. Williams was the lone runner on the 2008 team as a freshman and Bauerle joined her as a sophomore.

"Getting a victory means everything in the world to me," Williams said. "After my freshman year, standing on the line by myself, not only finally having a team, but winning is such an accomplishment for all of us."

"After years of running without a team, finally getting a victory is amazing," added Bauerle. "It shows that we weren't running for nothing all this time. What a great way to remember my senior year of cross country."

Despite the fact Nottingham had no team, Williams was not discouraged from coming out after her father Mark encouraged Sam and her sister Jenilee to run as youngsters.

"I always had a passion for it," she said. "My sister was the only girl on the cross country team her senior year. I saw how much of a family she and the team became and the closeness of that team attracted me to the program as well."



Despite being given a pair devil horns by Sam Williams (left), Melissa Bauerle credits her senior teammate for changing her life by getting her into cross country. The two have formed the nucleus of a Northstars' team that won it's first meet in years on Tuesday.

Unfortunately there was no one to get close to her freshman year as Sam upheld the family tradition of being the lone harrier on the team. It wasn't easy training alone, and it really wasn't easy on meet days when teams like Hopewell and the West Windsors brought armies of runners.

"The start of a race with just me or even me and Melissa the next year, it was difficult being covered up by the hordes of girls from other teams," Williams said. "It was extremely intimidating but knowing that this was the sport I loved kept me walking to the line every meet.

"My dad taught me that when the situation is difficult, it's even more of a reason to work hard, so I did."

Williams not only worked hard on her behalf, but she put some work into doubling Nottingham's team membership her sophomore year by getting Bauerle on board.

Heading into high school, Melissa had every intention of running cross country and track, having signed up for it in 8th grade. But with all the new responsibilities and challenges of high school, Bauerle "was so overwhelmed with school" that she didn't bother with either sport.

"I kept saying that I wanted to, but I was so shy I didn't want to go alone," she said.

The summer before her sophomore year, Melissa got a text from a girl in her Italian class.

"She was asking if I wanted to join the cross country team and, despite my fears, I agreed," Bauerle said. "I began doing the summer workouts and it was history from there. The girl who went out of her way to ask me to join the team was Sam and I can't thank her enough, because she changed my life."

So the Northstars had all of two girls toeing the starting line in 2009. Even that was a little daunting, however.

"Seeing schools such as Steinert and West Windsor send out so many girls was very intimidating," Bauerle said. "We did our best to not let it show. Before every race we prayed and did a quiet chant to hype ourselves up.

"I think the bond Sam and I made, being the only two runners, was what kept us going back each week. We trained with each other everyday and had grown so close that we couldn't stand to leave the other out there alone."

With that kind of dedication to each other, Walsh had a solid, first-class nucleus to build around. When Foley began getting the other runners onto the track team, which carried over to cross country, it was like a reward for the lean years that Williams and Bauerle had to endure.

Also on the team this year are Rebecca Sanchez, Safia Bryant, Lian King and Joyce Lai. Whether the Northstars could win or not didn't matter to the two veterans.

"At the start of the year my happiness was absolutely not on the fact that we could win a meet," Williams said. "I was just happy to have a team and actually be considered a serious competitor for the first time."

"Seeing that we had a full girl's team was awesome!" Bauerle said. "Of course the thought of winning a meet came to my head, but I didn't think the rest of the team would be that competitive just yet. We still had a long way to go to get people in shape and ready to compete.

“However, as the first few meets went by we could see that this was going to be a good year, because the girls were dropping their times with each race.”

Both girls plan on running in college, saying it is where their heart is and that it's a passion. One can't help but be happy for them after how they hung in there for so many years.

Leading the list is Walsh.

“What they had to go through, standing on that line, just the two of them, was very intimidating,” the Irish One said. “But the two of them had the courage to stand up and run. As we got some new girls on the team their courage spread to other girls. Other girls would be nervous to get on the starting line, but they gave them that courage to do it.”

Courage that led to a memorable victory.

Could more be on the way?

“This win,” promised Williams, “will not be our last!”