

Liem Chot, Junior, Lincoln North Star

I'm told that it's an incredible feeling to win a state cross country championship. Sometimes a feeling of relief, when you're favored to win and are able to live up to expectations. Other runners experience pure joy, knowing that they won a battle over several other evenly-matched competitors. And there's the utter shock of Lincoln North Star's Liem Chot (rhymes with 'dot'), who captured the 2018 Class A title.

"I was hoping to medal in 2018 after placing 23rd as a freshman," he told me a few weeks ago. "I knew I'd been training well and had run well all year, but you never know at State. Jose (Gonzalez of Fremont) beat me at the conference meet, and other guys had been close all year." Indeed, while Liem had won five of his seven cross country races in 2018, there were a number of runners within 10 seconds of him – including Tyler Boyle and Trevor Acton of Lincoln Southwest, Ethan Goldner of Omaha Westside, Jacob Kosmicki of Grand Island, and Dillon McNeill of Papio South.

After a string of years where the Class A winner was the pre-race favorite – most recently Jake Ralston, Seth Hirsch, John Nownes, Wyatt McGuire and Joe Harter – Liem's title was arguably the first unexpected win since Isaac Allen of Lincoln East topped Jacob Olson and Mohamed Hamdan in 2011. Chot and Allen are two of three Lincoln high school runners to win the Class A boys title since 1997, along with Parker Schoen in 2008 (Schoen is the new head track coach at LSW).

Liem's low expectations weren't shared by everyone. He began the pre-season ranked 12th by Nebraska Elite, jumped to 5th by September 9, and rose to 2nd behind Jose Gonzalez on September 30. While Gonzalez was clearly the pre-race favorite at State and ranked 1st in six of the eight weekly NETC polls, the margin between the top six was razor thin. Gonzalez, Boyle and Goldner all had deeper racing experience than Chot, Acton and Komicki, but the latter three had made huge leaps during the season.

Matt Musiel, Lincoln North Star's head coach, was possibly the least surprised by Liem's State title. "I knew he had the ability, his confidence had been growing with each win, and he kept improving in his training in the last three weeks leading up to State. I thought he had a good chance at being in the top three, but I didn't tell him that."

If you want to discuss Liem Chot's running career, Africa seems like a good place to start. Born in an Ethiopian refugee camp, he moved back to a tumultuous South Sudan with his two older brothers after both parents had died before Liem's third birthday. The three boys lived with their aunt until 2011, when his older sister Nyanthiay (whom had never met Liem) saved enough money to move Liem, Goanar and Koat to a safer environment in Uganda. On December 22, 2013, the three boys arrived in Nebraska, which could not have been any colder or more foreign to them. The boys had never seen snow or experienced temperatures below forty degrees.

(The paragraph above simplifies Liem's journey to America. Cindy Lange-Kubick of the Lincoln Journal Star wrote an incredible article on Nyanthiay's family in May 2014; see ["Will of steel: After long struggle, sister becomes mother to Sudanese brothers"](#).)

Liem started fifth grade a few weeks later at Elliott Elementary in Lincoln. He says that first semester was a struggle. He had taken two years of English in Uganda, but it took a while to adjust to the difficulty of all the topics. However, by the middle of sixth grade he finally felt like he was academically on par with his classmates.

Back then, basketball and skateboarding were Liem's things. He loved basketball and played it whenever he could. His brother Goanar was a mid-distance runner at Lincoln North Star, four years older than Liem, and he'd occasionally get Liem to tag along for summer running or Saturday practice. Liem was as likely to show up in basketball shoes as running shoes and, as he put it, "I was not into it." Still, he liked it enough to compete in 8th grade cross country in hand-me-down running shoes from Goanar, winning all four races on a low-key LPS schedule. He didn't train outside of the team practice, and he rode his skateboard to his first meet at Roper Park. Liem and distance running were definitely not love at first sight.

That platonic relationship continued over the next year. Goanar and Coach Musiel coaxed Liem into going out for cross country as a freshman, but he didn't run over the summer, focusing instead on basketball. Despite his lack of preparation, Liem's natural talent won out. He medaled at every meet leading up to State, including a 7th place finish at the UNK meet and 3rd place at Districts. The weather for the 2017 State meet was not ideal, with temperatures in the high 80's and wind gusting up to 35 miles per hour during the Class A race. Experience won out, and the top 12 Class A medalists were juniors or seniors. Liem had an off day, finishing in 23rd place, the 2nd-fastest freshman behind Nick Abdalla of Omaha Bryan (18th).

Liem did not expect to compete in track even after that successful cross country season. He still loved basketball more, and he played for the North Star freshman team. However, by the end of the season he began to realize (undoubtedly with encouragement from Goanar and Coach Musiel) that he had reached his potential in basketball, while he had only scratched the surface with running.

His freshman track season started slowly, primarily because he didn't run over the winter due to his basketball commitments. After starting the season at 4:48 and 10:02, he qualified for State in both distance events, placing 12th and 8th, respectively. His freshman bests were 4:32 and 9:54.

Liem's sophomore track season was even more impressive. A few hours after North Star finished 8th in the 4x800 relay at the State meet, Liem returned to a steamy track for the 3200. Tyler Boyle went out aggressively to build a sizable lead in the first 1600, but Liem and Mason McDonald of Millard West began to cut into the lead in the last 800 meters. Both closed in a flurry, but Boyle held on for the win in 9:37. Liem was less than two seconds back, with McDonald a close third. On Saturday, Liem finished 6th in the 1600, setting a 3-second PR in 4:24.9.

It's often difficult for me to interview runners in person, but I'd heard enough about Liem that I didn't want to settle for a phone interview. He didn't let me down.

As part of the interview process, I always ask students to tell me what they do outside of running so I can get a complete picture. Liem is active in the FCA chapter, and he still visits the Boys & Girls Club where he spent so much time playing basketball. I asked him if he played video games: "No, I'd rather draw."

"What else do you do? How do you spend your time?" He leaned back and tried to think of something else. Coach Musiel gave a suggestion.

"Oh yeah, I got baptized in April at North Point Church. I grew up in a Christian home, but we didn't do much with our faith. I started a Bible-study group when I was a freshman, and I figured it out on my own. My faith is an important part of who I am."

This is Matt Musiel's 30th season as a cross country coach. He was a 400/800 runner at Augustana, and he ran cross country for one season before deciding it wasn't in his DNA. After 13 years at Bellevue West, he felt that he was meant to be a part of North Star's opening in 2003. He and his wife both teach at North Star, his two sons graduated from the school, and he has an 8th grade daughter at Moore Middle School. North Star has a diverse student body and the cross country program embodies that diversity. The 2019 team features approximately 50 boys and 20 girls, with the students or their parents emigrating from 19 different countries. Coach Musiel is happily adding a 20th flag for a foreign exchange student from Italy.

While Liem's role as returning state champion means that he's inevitably the leader of the team, this was not the case this summer for North Star. Liem worked as a camp counselor in rural Nebraska for two months this past summer, training on his own while other upperclassmen led the largest summer running group Coach Musiel has had in years. Coach Musiel is excited to see how the season plays out, with a solid pack of 7 or 8 runners competing for varsity spots. North Star returns 6 runners, including Daniel Pierce and Ethan Zabrowski, from last year's team that placed 7th at State. Class A coaches are also high on the team, ranking them 3rd in the pre-season poll.

While Coach Musiel has had strong teams in previous years, the strength of the team has usually been middle distance runners like Mohamed Hamdan and Moujtaba Mohammed. This year's team is largely composed of distance-minded runners, and the boys seem to enjoy road miles and the bonds they create. Coach Musiel thinks his two biggest challenges this season will be to keep them healthy and to avoid them from peaking too early. He plans to keep building a base early in the season with less focus

on times until the second half of the season. North Star will likely see Papio South and Grand Island early in the season, but they likely won't go head to head with Fremont or Lincoln Southwest until after the first four meets.

With all of his success, it's easy to forget that Liem has been training for just over two years. As a relative novice, Liem is still learning how to train and race, how to be a leader, and how to listen to his body. For his experience level, Coach Musiel observes that Liem is remarkably good about stretching, injury prevention and the little things that keep runners on the right track. Over the summer, he lifted weights, biked and swam laps in addition to averaging 45-50 miles per week.

As a junior, Liem is just beginning to hear from collegiate distance running programs. He's open to any geographic area, with a preference for somewhere warm. His two months at camp this summer helped him realize he could be away from his tight-knit family, and all those miles on gravel roads confirmed that he'd prefer to go to college in an area that isn't too crowded. North Star offers a 'Take Charge' class to juniors that explores different careers, and Liem hopes the class will help him narrow down the career he'd like to pursue. With his knack for drawing, he thinks he may have an interest in architecture or interior design. Coach Musiel noted that, "Liem takes care of his classwork" and will be prepared to succeed in college.

At 6'2", Liem stands out in a cross country race, and his biggest challenge this year may be to adjust to heightened expectations – from others and from himself. NETC has Liem 1st in the pre-season rankings, so he'll have a target on his back. He needs to work on running from the front, and he'd like to lower his PR from 15:54 to 15:30. With so few miles under Liem's belt, Coach Musiel thinks it's too early to know what Liem's potential is.

It may help that Liem is now in a committed relationship with running. The platonic friendship from his freshman year bloomed into a full-blown love affair last fall, not long after his State title. He's a little bit embarrassed that it took so long for him to appreciate the gift of running, but he plans to use the next few years to make up for lost time.

The road to a second state championship will not be easy, but Liem's past journeys have never been simple. He's traveled from Ethiopia to Lincoln, from ESL classes to just another kid with a Midwestern accent, from basketball to distance running, and from a distant relationship with God to a full embrace. After all of this, adjusting to higher expectations may be one of these easiest obstacles Liem has ever faced.

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