

## OPS cancels Fall 2020 sports

On August 7, Omaha Public Schools (OPS) Superintendent Cheryl Logan announced that OPS was moving to fully-remote learning and suspending sports activities until at least October 16, the end of first quarter. The announcement came less than a day after Logan told a South Omaha gathering, “we can have either have school or we can have sports – we can’t have both.” While many OPS athletes were willing to give up sports in exchange for in-person learning, the decision to forego both has been a difficult blow.

Much of the media attention regarding the suspension of sports has focused on football, and particularly the impact that a missed season may have on scholarship offers. However, the suspension also impacted teams in five other sports: girls’ golf, boys’ tennis, volleyball, softball and cross country. Class A post-season qualifying will have ended for all sports except volleyball and football by October 16; if OPS resumes sports on October 19, volleyball is realistically the only sport in which OPS athletes could salvage part of their season.

Since the August 7 announcement, COVID remains a threat but there have been positive signs. Infection rates, deaths and hospital occupancy rates in Douglas County have levelled off or fallen, and Millard Public Schools announced a return to full-time in-person learning as of August 31. Sports competitions across Nebraska began in earnest by August 28, with relatively few cancellations due to COVID.

Last week OPS students took to social media to ask OPS to reinstate the fall sports season, mimicking the #letusplay used by college and high school athletes the past few months. Athletes and parents also staged a rally outside OPS headquarters on September 1. Based on new comments from Dr. Logan, these efforts will not change the OPS decision.

Over the past two weeks, I’ve reached out to a number of OPS cross country athletes at Omaha North, Omaha Northwest, Omaha Burke and Omaha South to get their perspective on the cancelled season. I’ve also pulled my notes from previous conversations with cross country coaches regarding how they think the sport impacts students. Finally, I’ve touched base with a few non-OPS XC coaches regarding how a cancelled season would have impacted their students, as well as how the absence of OPS teams will impact State berths. *(Please note that OPS policy prevents coaches from interacting with media without District approval during the COVID era.)*

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Both Omaha Burke teams were expected to compete for state berths this season. The girls returned six of seven varsity runners from the 2019 team, and two top runners injured for all of the 2019 season were expected to be major contributors this year. The freshman class also looked strong during summer workouts.

On the boys’ side, returning state medalist Logan Hauschild led a talented group of four seniors, including Sam Runde, Leo Schumacher and Aaron Jendro. The Burke team peaked at the end of the 2019 season, finishing 5<sup>th</sup> & Metros and 2<sup>nd</sup> at Districts. Absent a rash of injuries, the team appeared to be a lock for a state berth in 2020.

I spoke with Logan, who was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the NETC Class A pre-season poll. His goal this season was to finish in the top six at State, and he had run consistently all summer, averaging 30-40 miles per week with regular speed work. "After struggling my first two years of high school running, last fall I finally put the pieces together," he said. "I was hoping for a strong spring and fall to catch the attention of college coaches, but now I'll have to do it another way." Logan had a strong suspicion all summer that fall sports would be cancelled, but he didn't expect that the decision would be limited to OPS schools.

The OPS decision has been challenged by parents, including four Burke XC parents who spoke at the August 5 OPS school board meeting. Logan's father was one of those speakers, and Mr. Hauschild later spoke at an NSAA board meeting to ask the NSAA to intervene. The NSAA declined to do so, indicating that its policy was to respect the decisions made by local school districts. However, the NSAA previously stated that it will allow a high school to compete in sports even if the school utilizes partial- or full-time remote learning.

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Jack Cotton is a junior at Omaha Northwest who had hoped to return for his third season. While neither the Northwest boys' nor girls' team was likely to earn a state XC berth this season, the team members were still stung by the OPS decision. Jack learned about the season cancellation by text about an hour after he had bought new running shoes. "I was really unhappy when I heard the news. I understand that they want to keep us safe, but I felt like a summer of hard training had been wasted."

Jack describes his team as tight, family-like and all working hard to improve. He started running in middle school, primarily because his older sister had done the same, but he didn't fall in love with running until he was a freshman. He's seen strong gains since he started, cutting over six minutes off his 5k time during his freshman year. While he's continued to run since the August 7 announcement, he admits that he misses his running partners, especially the accountability and companionship they provide.

Jack hasn't medaled in his first two years, but he already considers his cross country career a success story. "I've learned from distance running that you should always push yourself to be better, to strive for greatness, to keep pushing past the negative thoughts that come with any difficult task. The persistence and self-motivation I've learned from cross country can be applied to so many everyday situations, and it's made me a better person."

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Several non-OPS coaches with whom I spoke, while recognizing the difficult circumstances faced by densely-populated high schools, called the OPS decision a "devastating" blow for athletes. Interestingly, very few of them were concerned about lost competitions or reduced scholarship opportunities (I'll address scholarships in my next article). Instead, they focused largely on the academic and social aspects of cross country.

From an academic perspective, few coaches were concerned that the loss of the season would jeopardize their runners' academic standing. While distance running often improves academic discipline, one coach noted that in the last ten years he's only had two girls who were suspended due to low grades. Collegiate cross country teams frequently win the 'top GPA' competition at their schools, and high school XC coaches report similar experiences for their teams.

As with many high school teams, cross country provides a built-in friend group. However, cross country is a 'no-cut' sport that attracts students who are only marginally interested in distance running but who like to be around the type of kids who are attracted to running. One OPS coach told me last year that her runners – while often not talented at running – excel at being nice, working hard in class and in practice, and see the team as a way to connect with other communities within the school.

Lincoln North Star (LNS) is an incredible example of this – at meets they hang flags for all the different nationalities represented on their team, and in 2019 they flew twenty flags. While OPS schools may not be able to fly as many flags as LNS, the 2019 Omaha Northwest team featured African American and Hispanic students as well as recent immigrants from Myanmar (Karen) and Sudan, and over 20% of Northwest and Benson students in the 2019-2020 school year were categorized by OPS as refugees. One coach observed that the cross country team is often the most diverse team at a public school because rapid communication and strong English skills are not integral to the team's success – as it would be in volleyball or football. He noted that his team is a mix of academically high and borderline students, including a few kids who participate in remedial education. However, regardless of their background, talent or body type, they are accepted as athletes and teammates.

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The OPS announcement effectively ended the high school season for OPS athletes in all six sports, but softball and volleyball players had ample club options to keep playing throughout the fall. The same goes for tennis and golf – athletes could continue accessing facilities and entering tournaments. Football doesn't have a club option, so players looked for other options. For example, the World Herald recently reported that six of Burke's best football players have transferred to other schools so they could play this fall.

What if you want to keep training and competing but don't have the financial resources to do so? Measured by the percentage of students qualifying for free or subsidized lunch, OPS stands out as one of the poorest school districts in Class A. The 2019/2020 percentage for free and subsidized lunches was 74% for OPS, 47% for Lincoln Public Schools, 42% for Bellevue, 37% for Kearney, and below 10% at Elkhorn and Gretna. Several coaches expressed grave concern that the OPS cancellation would simply amplify the disparity between 'have' and 'have-nots' within OPS – the wealthy children could pursue club sports while the poorer children could not.

Fortunately, OPS cross country runners do have a low-cost option that they could pursue to compete this fall. The Nebraska association of USA Track and Field (<http://nebraskausatf.org>) offers cross country races from September 27 through November 8 in Omaha and Lincoln. Runners are only required to purchase a \$25 USATF membership and pay \$5-\$10 per race. Runners can also choose to join one of the

USATF clubs for practice sessions, and several don't charge a membership fee for the XC season. Road races are also an option for OPS runners, but they typically require higher entry fees than the USATF meets and fall racing calendar is a bit sparse due to COVID concerns.

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Nayera Abdessalam and Jackson Long are two varsity runners at Omaha North that were hoping to have good seasons this fall. Nayera qualified for State last year as a freshman after finishing 9<sup>th</sup> in Districts. She didn't start competing in cross country until she reached McMillan Middle School, but her soccer background translated well and she won the 2018 OPS 8<sup>th</sup> grade meet.

Nayera's siblings attended Omaha Central but she chose Omaha North, in part because of North's STEM program but also because she felt an immediate connection with Coach Mark Gudgel and the team. Coach Gudgel is able to offer the North runners several team-building activities, including a summer trip, team dinners and regular yoga sessions, which gave Nayera the chance to know more about her teammates than just their running abilities.

Despite running about 300 miles this summer, Nayera didn't have high hopes for a season. However, she was disappointed when the announcement was made, and her heart goes out to OPS seniors who are missing their final season. She plans to play soccer and continue to run this fall, but she's already discovered that it's easier to train hard if she has teammates and a coach to push her.

As a senior, Jackson had hoped to improve his PRs this fall and serve as a leader for the younger runners. He enjoyed the camaraderie and mutual support from his teammates the last two seasons, so much so that a "bad race didn't bum me out for very long because of the warmth the rest of my team extended to me. It is always more fun to run with a community devoted to it, and that's what I will miss the most this season."

Of all the students I interviewed, Jackson had the strongest opinion regarding in-person classes. He was a leader in developing the [www.safeschoolsomaha.com](http://www.safeschoolsomaha.com) website and petition to urge OPS to delay in-person learning until the COVID outbreak was more controlled. He felt the risk for cross country practice was much lower than in-person, and he participated in summer conditioning until it was suspended by OPS in late July. While he doesn't plan to run in college, he empathizes with the student-athletes who were hoping for a strong fall to improve their chances for an athletic scholarship.

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When I spoke to non-OPS coaches after the August 7 announcement, I repeatedly heard the sentiment, "I feel so bad for Omaha South." Aside from a few powerhouse perennials like Millard West and Fremont, most high school teams go through cycles of success and rebuilding. The 2020 season was expected to feature once-in-a-generation boys' and girls' teams at Omaha South.

The girls team returned Angie Gomez (state qualifier in 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> grades), Vanessa Neri (16<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> in Districts in 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> grades) and Jessica Fuertes (18<sup>th</sup> at Districts as junior, team qualifier in 9<sup>th</sup>). Several returning underclassmen were expected to make contributions, and there seemed to be plenty of potential in the freshman class.

Angie, Vanessa and Jessica had all run consistently over the summer, and they traveled to Boulder during the last week of summer to add a bit of altitude and hill work to their fitness base. The three girls were hiking when they saw a social media post about the OPS announcement. Their coaches later sent texts and an emotional e-mail. Three weeks later, all three struggled to put words to how devastated they were. Angie noted that “things happen that you can’t explain,” but she’s still trying to understand how non-OPS schools are participating in sports when OPS isn’t. “The world seems to be crumbling, but I’m also trying not to be selfish about my circumstances, and instead try to understand all of the other viewpoints about when we should return to school and sports.”

Like many cross country athletes, Angie didn’t view herself as a runner. She often finished last in middle school races with times of around twenty-eight minutes for two miles, and she only went out for the high school team because a friend convinced her to do it. Three years later, she says that “running is now such a part of my life that I would consider running in college.” She’ll continue to run this fall but with less intensity than she had planned.

Vanessa’s goal was to qualify for State individually and for the team to place at least 6<sup>th</sup> at State, which would be the best finish in Omaha South history. Vanessa will continue to run through graduation but does not expect to compete in college due to a heavy academic load. She takes part in the UNMC High School Alliance, where seniors attend high school classes in the morning and UNMC-organized classes in the afternoon. She’d like to become a doctor, and the focus she gained through running will be one of the tools she’ll need to achieve that goal.

After her 18<sup>th</sup> place finish at Districts as a junior, Jessica was motivated to put in the work necessary to qualify individually and with the team. In addition to the lost season, she’s disappointed to not be at school. “Omaha South is different from any other Omaha high school. Students are connected and caring for each other, the coaches and teachers look out for us, and there’s great school spirit.”

While the Omaha South coaches continue to communicate with the girls by text and e-mail, neither method replicates the in-person mentoring that their coaches provide. Jessica observed that Coaches Tripp and Anderson are invested not only in their athletic performances but also in their personal lives. She remarked, “our coaches check in on our personal lives, made sure everything was OK at home, and just kept encouraging us to be good people and be successful in our lives.”

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While the Omaha South girls were hoping for their best finish ever at State, the boys’ team had ambitions to make the podium. The boys also had a senior-heavy team, led by Nick Abdalla (7<sup>th</sup> in State as a sophomore), Felix Cruz-Tapia (21<sup>st</sup> at State as a junior), Adam Ali (40<sup>th</sup> at State), Gus Hodoly, Yael Blanco-Zamudio and Joshua Lopez-Hernandez. The projected top eight runners trained together all

summer, and the seniors were returning from their own Boulder running trip when they heard the news.

Life is not always easy for Omaha South students. It is the largest OPS high school with 2,800 students and has OPS' highest percentage of students qualifying for free or subsidized lunches (86.8% in 2019-2020). Many of its students are first- or second-generation Americans and some are expected to work part-time jobs to assist their family. Their families have succeeded in American because of strong work ethics and resiliency, and those skills were expected to pay off handsomely for the cross country team this fall.

Adam and Felix first ran together in 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Bryan Middle School, finishing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the OPS city meet. After excelling in the gym class mile at the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade – the first time Nick had run a mile – Coach Shawn Exner convinced Nick to join the cross country team in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Nick, Felix and Adam swept the top three spots at the OPS city meet, and the Bryan team won the team title at the State Junior High meet a few weeks later. They hoped to run together at Omaha South. Unfortunately, while Nick lived five minutes from South and fifteen minutes from Bryan, the OPS map dictated that he attend Bryan.

During their freshman year, Nick excelled at Bryan (17<sup>th</sup> in State) and Adam was a team qualifier at South, but Felix lost interest in the sport after 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Adam kept nagging at him during their freshman year and convinced Felix to recommit for the track season. Felix is frank about that time in his life: “Adam saved my life and lit a fire back in me to be better, and honestly, I was heading down a dangerous path.”

Felix and Adam had successful sophomore seasons, although both missed out on qualifying for State. Nick finished 7<sup>th</sup> at State cross country and also qualified for State track, where he finished 10<sup>th</sup> in the 3200. However, his Bryan distance coach took on a new role at the end of that year, and Nick transferred to Omaha South at the start of his junior year.

Due to the NSAA transfer rules, Nick couldn't compete in varsity cross country races as a junior. However, his time among Nebraska runners at Nike Regionals (15:54) was second only to Zach Van Brocklin of Norris (15:38). Felix and Adam finished 4<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, respectively, at Districts, and Omaha South qualified for State as a team. As soon as the season ended, the team began discussing how a top-5 finish at State would establish a new high-water mark for the Omaha South program.

All three boys hope to run in college, and they had planned on posting note-worthy times this fall that would grab the attention of college coaches. Nick fears that he doesn't have the financial resources or the academic record to attend college without an athletic scholarship. He's already overcome considerable challenges; Nick and his sister emigrated from North Sudan six years ago once his father had saved enough money to bring them to America. Nick's goal is to graduate from college and find a good job to support his family – including his mother – that are still in Africa. (Adam has a similar background; his family emigrated from Nigeria in 2010.)

If there is a 2021 track season, Nick will have gone twenty-two months between high school races, and the rest of the OPS distance athletes will have a seventeen-month gap. In a sport measured in seconds, it seems as if time has stopped for these athletes.

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I intended this to be a 1500-word article, but it's difficult to put a limit on how to describe the wide impact of two lost seasons of distance running. It can't be boiled down to miles, minutes and medals. It's not just about the top performers on a team; it has impacted everyone on the team. It's about bus rides, shared adversity, community building, pushing past limits, school pride, laughter, mentoring, weight loss, lives redirected, inclusion and so many other things that can't be included in a COVID cost/benefit analysis. High school students don't have an opportunity to redshirt in sports or in life, and the students told me they have lost the two communities that mean the most to them – their schools and their teams.

All of these athletes said that they plan to keep running this fall even if there's no hope of competing. That will have to be enough.

It doesn't ease the pain of a lost season, but I'll end with the words that Coach Gudgel of Omaha North wrote to his team after the announcement. Jackson Long shared this excerpt:

*"Racing was never what made you a runner. Tenacity, integrity, grit, intellect, ambition, and above all else, humanity - these are the things that make us runners, these things cannot be taken from us, and these are the things that will serve us best as we struggle and ultimately persevere during a time of crisis."*

Maybe it was never about racing. Maybe it's always been about the team, but the kids don't have that either.

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