

Mount de Sales goes the distance to historic IAAM cross country title

WESTMINSTER – The running program at Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville is accustomed to logging serious mileage, not all of it on foot.

Without a 400-meter track, speed workouts are done at Mount St. Joseph High School in Irvington. Their campus isn't conducive to longer distances, either, so the Sailors' regularly car-pool to the Catonsville campus of the Community College of Baltimore County, with access to the Hilton area of Patapsco Valley State Park and even the grounds of the All Saints Sisters of the Poor.

That caravan includes a Hyundai Elantra, and its passengers make it one of the fastest cars in town.

The driver is Samantha Facius, top finisher at the 2017 Interscholastic Athletic Association of Maryland cross country championships. Riding shotgun is Bella Whittaker, a junior whose sprint talents helped Mount de Sales win the IAAM track and field title last spring.

The three girls who share the back seat include Whittaker's sister, Juliette, a 14-year-old freshman who led the way Oct. 30 at McDaniel College, where the Sailors put together an unprecedented performance in the IAAM championship meeting.

Juliette Whittaker passed Facius in the final quarter-mile, a 1-2 finish that was backed in the A Conference scoring by Bella Whittaker in seventh; freshman Elizabeth Freymann in eighth; and junior Mackenzie Bell in 11th. Ryleigh Hicks, a sophomore, accentuated the Sailors' depth with a top-20 finish.

It added up to 29 points, believed to be a scoring record for the A Conference championships, and the Sailors' first title at that level.

Their preparation included a scouting run at McDaniel the week before, and, for some, a fitness base years in the making that is being developed by coach Steve Weber, an affiliate professor in philosophy at Loyola University, and Gene Williams,

Mount de Sales' veteran indoor and outdoor track and field coach.

The Whittaker sisters enjoyed the occasional middle school cross country meet while attending the School of the Incarnation in Gambrills, but their primary athletic focus was the Greater Baltimore Swim Association.

"It helps a lot, especially with my breathing," said Juliette, acknowledging that her competitive swimming days are done.

Racing is in the Whittaker sisters' blood, as their parents, Paul and Jill, met at Georgetown University, where he was a half-miler and she was a hurdler.

Paul Whittaker hailed from Xaverian High School in Brooklyn, N.Y., so when the parishioners of St. Joseph in Odenton were selecting a high school for their sons, it was Mount St. Joseph, a Xaverian school. Nicholas is a senior at Harvard. Alex, who helped the Gaels to two MIAA cross country titles, is a sophomore at Yale.

On a gorgeous autumn day at McDaniel in which even the sky was a Mount de Sales blue, their little sister covered 3.1 miles in 19 minutes, 37.7 seconds, less than two seconds ahead of Facius. The Barnhart Invitational was the only previous race in which Juliette Whittaker bested Facius.

The Sailors' leadership starts with Facius, the student council president. As the competition went out a bit too zealously, she held back and talked Juliette Whittaker through the early stages of the race.

What's better, an individual championship in 2017, or a team title in 2018?

"I've always got to say, the team," said Facius, whose family worships at St. Joseph in Eldersburg. "This is a beautiful thing, the feeling of a team effort."

Julia Merriman finished third, leading Notre Dame Preparatory to a runner-up team finish. Third in the team standings was Maryvale Preparatory, which got a fifth-place finish from Rachel Thomas. St. Mary's claimed the B Conference title, as Lyndsey Whynock, Grayson McKenzie and Abby Gendell finished 6-7-8.

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Email Paul McMullen at pmcmullen@CatholicReview.org