

Against the Wind

Name: Blake Graf

Grade: Senior

Number of State Titles: 2

Lesson: Dreams require pushing yourself to the limit, both mentally and physically.

STORY BY PETER LEONARD
PHOTO BY GABE RODRIGUEZ

Blake Graf never expected to be running for the 15th best cross country team in the nation, one that now has won back-to-back state championships.

“In my middle school races I couldn’t even run two miles straight,” Graf said.

In the winter of his eighth grade year, Graf, senior, decided to try cross country. “In eighth grade I did the winter program and that was the first time I got to see what high school practices were like,” he said. “It was really cool and all the people seemed really nice on the team and seemed like a big family.”

Now convinced he had found an activity he could continue throughout high school, Graf went into his freshman year committed to cross country.

“I think it was my freshman year when over that winter conditioning I was pushed by some of the upperclassmen to really open up my potential,” Graf said. “I ran in a few varsity races that [sophomore] year and after that I stuck with the varsity crew and ran with them, which was a great experience.”

Going from middle school races where Graf could barely run from Mountain Ridge to Starbucks without walking, to running a three-mile state course and helping win a team title, required learning a lesson that would stick with Graf through even the toughest of courses.

“I think it started out with the people I was running with. At first I was like, ‘Oh, they’re running too fast. I have to slow down,’ but I knew I could stay up with them and I knew if I stayed in it mentally I could continue running with them,” Graf said. “That’s how I learned that the mental part was key. Cross country is not only a physical sport, but a mental one, too.”

Graf joined the varsity squad full time his junior year, a year in which he ran in the varsity boys’ squad for its first cross country state title.

Entering senior year, Graf knew that expectations had changed. Instead of being the underdog, Mountain Vista was now a known name. Other schools would go up to the neon green-clad runners and heap praise or distaste.

“At the beginning of the season we kind of knew that we were going to have a target on our back,” Graf said. “That means we had to train

even harder, pushing each other and ourselves mentally and physically further so that we could have a chance to win state again.”

After running a stellar season, one in which the varsity boys won all seven of the races the full squad competed in, the boys varsity cross country team was now at state defending last year’s state title.

“We were all definitely pretty nervous. We [the varsity boys] just kept it in the back of our mind though that we had to do good today, had to push each other and push ourselves and try to get another state title.”

But solace was not found. Right after finishing the race, Graf confronted another problem. The coaches were not sure if the team had won. Hearing this hit a few members especially hard.

“Some of us started blaming ourselves and saying ‘Oh, if we don’t win it’s my fault because I didn’t have that great of a race.’ But no, we’re a team. If we don’t win, it’s because as a team we didn’t do well,” Graf said.

The tension did not last long.

“We went to the stadium where they announced that we had won. Once we heard we were not third or second we were like, ‘Alright, we’re pretty sure we are first.’ All that doubt we had was put aside and replaced with excitement, excitement to win state again,” Graf said.

Six years of years of running and pushing through the pain had finally paid off.

“All throughout the year you’re just doing your workouts and building yourself up. You’re putting money in the bank and once you win, you get to cash out,” he said. “It feels great to finally get rewarded for all the hard work you’d been saving up for.”

Graf, along with 30 other select Vista runners, is now looking to their largest race of the year. The season is coming to a climax Nov. 23 in Arizona at the Nike Cross Country Regionals, which brings the opportunity to compete with some of the best teams in the country.

For having come this far, Graf has learned a valuable lesson.

“Just don’t give up,” he said, “continue running and push because through cross country you’ll not only meet your best friends, you’ll have a sport that you’ll love to do.”

