YOU RUN HOW FAR?

The evolution of cross country in Nebraska is one of increasing distances, varied courses, challenging fall weather and the beginning of a new girls sport.

Like most state championships cross country began under the auspices of the University of Nebraska.

The first cross country race was held on the UNL campus on October 30, 1954 and was conducted by Nebraska track coach Jerry Lee. It was a mile and a half run on the campus with instructions to register in front of the UNL Coliseum. There were no team championships, only individual awards and consisted of only one class. Schools were limited to four entries. Medals were awarded to the first 10 runners in addition all contestants received free Knothole tickets to the afternoon football game.

The following three years the same format was used with Husker track coach Frank Sevigne in charge. NSAA rules regarding eligibility were to be followed in all cases. 1958 saw a change in the format when schools were allowed 5 entries with the first four used to determine a team championship. That year 10 medals and a team trophy were awarded. According to long time Lincoln High coach and Hall of Fame inductee Harold Scott the race was conducted at Pioneers golf course.

1960 was the first year that cross country was officially sanctioned by the NSAA. The race was to be held on the University course (Pioneers golf course) and was divided into two divisions. Schools with 200 or more boys were in Class A and schools with less than 200 were in Class B. Entry fee that year was .50 per boy. In Class A there were 52 boys from 12 schools with Scottsbluff claiming the championship. In Class B there were 71 runners from 20 schools and Crofton was the champion. Scottsbluff was lead by individual winner Joe Perez and set a team record 14 points for 4 runners that still stands today. The following year Class C would be added using he same format as the other two classes.

Class D would be added in 1994.

The meet over the next few years would be run on several different courses. In 1963 Thunder Ridge golf course was the site of the 2 mile race. The course was located at the intersection of 70th and Pioneers and now is the site of a strip mall and bank. 1964 saw Seacrest park the site of the state meet. It was also the year that district qualifying was implemented. 1965 the meet director became Lincoln High Athletic Director Jim Sommers meaning that check in now shifted from UNL to Lincoln High. From 1965 to 1970 the meet was run at Pioneers Park. In the years the meet was hosted at Pioneers the instructions were to proceed to “the start….near the old railroad engine north of the wooded area.” That locomotive has since been moved to Haymarket Park in downtown Lincoln. The long hill now a part of the current Pioneer’s course is today affectionately known as “Choo-choo hill” .

Should be noted that there were no facilities available at Pioneers during the time it was used as the state course.

That now brings us to the year 1971. Long time XC fans will tell of many varieties of weather to beset the state meet. None could top what happened in 1971. Hall of Famer Bob Whitehouse was the Athletic Director of Omaha South who served as the host school. Running on South’s home course at Spring Lake golf course Whitehouse remembers that it seemed to rain non stop for several days preceding the meet. Attempting to “paint a line” they met with futility. It seemed as soon as they finished, the line washed away. The following day a new attempt to mark the course with a “chalk substance” resulted in the same scenario.

The next option was to go to a near-by lumber yard and purchase as many 4 foot wooden stakes as possible and use these to mark the course. Starting at 5:30 the day of the meet they marked the course on a day that revealed a soggy course and an ongoing mist. What could be deemed a 1.9 mile mud run, runners had no option but to slide down an 8-10 foot hill, and traverse any bare spot which had turned to pure mud. Class B individual champion Dan Jones from Holdrege recalled that walking the course prior to the meet was not possible and that “we started in ankle deep water and finished in the same, in between was mud.” After the first several runners it was hard to identify any individual or team.

The following year of 1972 saw the move to the Kearney Country Club. No one envisioned the long tenure that would develop as we enter the 47th running of the state meet at Kearney. During that time the distance increased to 2.5 miles in 1973. 1972 was also the first time that individuals could vie for individual honors at state. Previously if you had qualified with a team but had not been in the top six individuals at districts you could not medal as an individual at state.

1975 saw the change in Class A of running 7 and scoring 5. Classes B and C continued to run 5 and score 4. The change to running 6 and scoring 4 in Class B would occur in 1985. Classes C and later D would follow in 1990. 1980 was a historic year as distances increased to meters with the boys race now 5000 meters and for the first time girls would compete in a state cross country meet at 4000 meters. Due to early participation numbers there were no districts for girls to qualify for the state meet. Of note in that first championship, the girls team from McCook set a record team score for four runners with 18 points. A record that still stands today.

2013 saw the last significant change in the sport as both boys and girls would now race at 5000 meters (3.1 miles)

A sport that started on the campus of UNL has evolved into one of the more colorful fall sports. This fall 223 schools fielded teams. The mosaic of uniforms set against the fall foliage on the beautiful Kearney Country Club is one of the great settings during the high school sports season. May we see another 47years of this sport at this great venue.