

November 5, 2009

Shoeless performance helps win championship

Christian Lemon

On a soggy, mud soaked field in northern Louisiana, the warmth of the October sun greets a crowd of collegiate male and female runners. After hundreds of hours of preparation, thousands of miles of travel, two and a half inches of rain, and a three hour delay, harriers from 11 different schools are finally ready to run the Sun Belt Conference Championships.

As each team's athletes take the time to stretch and warm-up for the event, Middle Tennessee junior transfer student Chris Mason takes a moment to focus mentally in preparing himself for the task ahead. Mason, one of the more lighthearted members of the Blue Raider men's team, recalls the success that has led him to this point.

"I like the way I feel," he remarks. "I have felt this way before at the NJCAA Championships."

This feeling should serve him well as Mason, a SUNY-Delhi Junior College transfer, was the back-to-back 2007 and 2008 NJCAA D-III cross country national champion. Now as a member of the Blue Raiders, he will try to help win head coach Dean Hayes and the MT cross country program their first conference team championship in 26 years.

As the starting gun fires, over 90 runners attack the course. The early jostling for position has begun. Every athlete is looking to get an early advantage. Depending on individual preference, some like to run out front and push the pace, while others hang slightly back and wait for the right moment to make their move.

Mason's role on his team is different than in the past. With four other runners on the Blue Raider roster having earned All-Sun Belt cross country honors in their career, Mason is not the team's front runner.

"This is the first time in awhile I am not the top guy in the race. Now I am running with the pack and having to battle for positions, which I love."

As the pack hits the first quarter mile of the race, the course dips and crosses a small ravine. Normally, this would not phase an experienced runner, but because of the extreme rain in the two days prior, it has become a knee deep muddy quagmire. As Mason charges hard through the water, a racer's nightmare occurs and his shoe is sucked into the thick mud.

"As I was coming up the hill out of the ravine, I hit a real muddy spot and my shoe slicked off. At this point, I picked it up and ran with it and then my other shoe came off."

With no shoes and over four and a half miles of course left to run, Mason must either run the remainder of the race shoeless or stop to put his shoes back on, which would almost eliminate him from contention in the contest. Throwing caution to the wind, Mason throws his shoes to the side of the path and endures the remaining trail without them.

"It was unbelievable. I can't believe what he did," said Middle Tennessee junior and team top runner Festus Chemaoui. "Chris is the toughest person on our team."

In a sport that requires the most minimal equipment, shoes are everything to a cross country runner. Without the protection and traction of racing spikes, a racer must endure every rock, stick and bump of the unpredictable terrain. Like any great athlete, Mason took the disadvantage and made it work for him.

"It almost felt like an advantage going out there barefoot. I felt like I had a lot more traction. With all that mud and water on the course, it was useless to have shoes. I was able to claw into the ground and was confident with it," said Mason.

Four and half miles later, Mason crossed the finish line in a time of 27:42.24 to place eighth as the third Middle Tennessee finisher. He earned all-conference honors in his first Sun Belt meet and was a pivotal part of the Blue Raiders' first team conference championships since 1983.

"It means a lot to us. Coach (Hayes) had been working very hard with us all season and we felt we had the right guys to do it. All of us did what it took to win."

Mason and his teammates will compete next on November 14 in Tuscaloosa, Ala., at the NCAA South Regional.



Mason Head ()

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