

Stepping off the bus at their first meet of the season, seniors Cade Haak and Carson Sanders put their masks on, begin stretching, and walk to the starting line. They started their cross country journey as middle school friends but, as it draws to a close, they feel more like family. They are also part of the largest and most promising boys' varsity team that Pleasant Grove cross country has seen.

The team was brought together several years ago by friends. "Hayden Howell and Lucas Edwards convinced me to talk to Coach Boston the first day of strength and conditioning, and I haven't stopped running since," Cade said.

While friends brought the team together, it was good coaches that kept the team motivated.

"I started running track in seventh grade and cross country in eighth grade. It was the first sports team I was able to be a part of, and Coach Haynes was the one who got me into it," Carson said. "Just starting out as part of that team and immediately feeling like it was a place for me was really special."

But cross country doesn't look the same this year as it has in years' past. COVID-19 has caused UIL to put new rules and regulations in place.

"The biggest [change] is that we're not running on Saturdays; we're running on random days of the week. Also each group is running on a different day; varsity one day, JV one day, and middle school another," Cade said. "We're a team, so we have each other at practices, but at the meets varsity and JV are separated, so there aren't as many people to cheer you on."

Another big change is one that has affected nearly every activity this year: masks.

"We have to wear a mask when we show up and while we're stretching. We're allowed to take it off while we run, but have

to put it back on during the cool down and when we're leaving," said Carson.

While having to wear a mask is something that most students and athletes have already adapted to, there is another drastic change for this season.

"Another change is that we have teams of ten instead of seven," Cade said. "I think that could be good for our team because we're really deep and that just adds more depth to our roster."

Having more runners on each team definitely raises the level of competition.

"The bottom two or three are never sure for each meet; they could switch any which way and there are so many guys that could take those spots, so we work week in and week out to try to get those spots," Cade said.

Carson also expects that the bigger team will make them better "because there are so many people with varsity level performances that are fighting for it."

This depth is making these varsity runners excited about the season and their potential to go far -- maybe even all the way to State.

"I think the team this year is really deep. It's the best team so far since I have been running," Cade said. "Our senior class is pretty deep, the junior class has a lot of talent in it, and the underclassmen are looking good."

However, he knows it will take hard work from everyone. "We'll have to be fast, plain and simple. It's not just one individual being fast, it's having the whole team conditioned enough so they can push themselves past their limits to be able to run on a state level."

To reach their goal, they know it will take hard work. "It'll take a lot of miles. It's a lot of hard work," Cade said. "There's speed work training, long work, recovery runs, and all of it matters about equally. You just have to be able to string it all together nicely in order to make it to State."

Coach Gina Clark is helping the runners as they reach for State.

"She has met with us seniors to try to get things flowing, [and to get ideas of] how to improve team spirit and our connections with each other," Carson said.

This season has entailed a lot of changes, some of which being updated as often as every week.

"I think she has handled [the changes] pretty great," Cade said. "She has been able to adapt to them pretty quickly because she is getting changes each Friday. It's really impressive how she is able to get everything to work out for us week in and week out."

Despite all the changes and adjustments that have had to be made, the team is determined to work hard and do their best.

"I think [running] just teaches each and every runner to be tough in a lot of ways you didn't think you would have to be," Cade said. "You just learn to get through adversity through each race."

RUNS IN THE FAMILY



Sarah Johnson
reporter

Boys cross country team grows up together from middle school

Girls Varsity

Varsity team shares their favorite moments



"When I was a junior, I was the oldest on my team and I got really close to the underclassmen. We had a sleepover in the middle of the season with the team and got to hang out get closer without having to worry about running."

Delia Tuttlebee (12)

"My freshman year was when I got to go to the Chili Pepper run in Fayetteville with the team. It was my favorite because we got to all be together for such a long time and stay the night together."



Lydia Colvin (11)



"My favorite memory was at the Hallsville Invitational. It was our first real cross country race that was in a trail. Despite all the dirt that got in my eyes and the horrible roots, I managed to improve my time."

Ashley Hernandez (11)



Varsity boys and girls cross country teams celebrates Coach Gina Clark's birthday on Sept. 17 at the McCloud meet. The boys team won first, and the girls finished second. [ejones]