

RUNNING WITH IT

SPORTS
COLUMN
BY GAGE
CHAPMAN

Why Kansas race scores have been improving so much over the last few years

Over the last few years running throughout the world has gotten a lot faster. World record times have been falling in everything from the marathon to the 400-meter hurdles. This trend isn't just in pro and collegiate running, however, as high schoolers across the nation have been producing previously unheard-of times at a lightning-fast rate. Barriers such as the four-minute mile and 14-minute 5k have broken or are getting very close. In the last couple of years, Kansas runners have been following that same trend in their own right.

The 2021 track season was a great stepping-off point and a foreshadowing of what was to come, but I don't think anyone was prepared for what would come in the 2021 Cross country season.

The cross country season was kicked off by Shawnee Mission North's own Micah Blomker when he broke the unofficial Kansas record in the 5k. Blomker clocked a blazing fast 14:57 at the Olathe Twilight meet. Blomker finished the year as a state champion, running the fastest state time in nearly ten years. On the girl's side, Olathe North's Anjali Hocker Singh claimed her second straight state title, clocking the fastest time since 2016.

After a historic cross-country season, the stage was set for more records to fall during the track season. The best preview for state was at North Relays. The first distance race of the night didn't disappoint as Clay Shively from Wichita Trinity broke the North Relays record with a 4:10 in the 1600 meters. Then in the boys 400 meters, William Jones from Blue Valley High School broke the state record and ran the seventh fastest time in the nation.

Next up was state, and on the guy's side, no major records fell. The best time came from 4A as Tanner Newkirk from Hayden High School ran an 8:58 in the 3200 meters, setting the fastest time in the state for the year. On the girl's side, however, the state meet was anything but slow. In 2A it was

the Chesney Peterson show as she took home four state titles, yes four, and doing so in some pretty fast times. Her best time coming in the 1600, as Peterson ran the fastest time in the state. In 6A, the 3200 might of been the best race of the weekend as the top three times of the year came from this one race.

This brings us to this year with the 2022 Cross country season. Like the year before, the season was truly kicked off at the Olathe twilight meet. The men's race was historic, as three Kansas runners broke the 15-minute mark, and Shawnee Mission East Senior Wyatt Haughton took home a new state record with a time of 14:46. That time would end up being the

31st fastest in the nation at the end of the regular season. The women's race was a little less exciting but got some good times to start the season.

The next big race featuring all the major players wouldn't come until the state meets, but the wait was worth it. The state meets saw two course records fall on the infamous Rim Rock Farms course. The first record to fall came in the men's 6A race as Wyatt Haughton took home a state championship and a new course record in a time of 14:59, his 3rd time under 15:00 that season. The

next record came in the 5A women's race as Katelyn Rupe set a new course record with a time of 17:13, which was also the fastest in Kansas for the year.

Kansas runners once again showed out in national races. In the Nike Heartland Regional meet, the Olathe West women's team placed second as a team and qualified for Nike Nationals, the first Kansas team to achieve this feat. In the Garmin RunningLane Cross Country Championships, Wyatt Haughton took second in the mens gold race.

But why are runners getting so fast? It could be something beyond just Kansas. New spikes, better known as super spikes have been a big part of recent time drops throughout the world. A combination of carbon fiber plates and lighter,



Pushing to the end, junior Gavin Montagne races in the Oct. 15 Sunflower League XC meet. "While I don't know what specific meet," Montagne said. "My main goal at this time was probably to make moves and pass as many people as possible to lower my teams overall score. While times are a byproduct of cross country racing, your main goal should always to aid your team score by passing as many people as you can." *photo by Teryn DeBey*

Paving his way, junior Kaden Richardson competes in the Oct. 15 Sunflower League XC meet at Rim Rock Farm, Lawrence KS. "The team did well and placed 7th overall," Richardson said. "It wasn't my best race it was my 2nd slowest of the year. I was a little frustrated with my final time, but overall I was just happy to be competing with my teammates on the best course in Kansas." *photo by Teryn DeBey*

more resilient foam has helped runners at every level achieve faster times. Additionally, better access to training information and fewer injuries due to the growing uses of physical therapy create a compelling argument as to why we've seen time drops in Kansas. However, there may be a much simpler reason behind the time drops, Rod Murrow, a track coach and writer for Mile Split thinks we may just be in a cycle.

"The other part of it too, is things are just cyclical," Murrow said. "I don't know that we'll ever see another year like we saw in... 2016-2017. And that was the year that we had Cailie Logue, Molly Born, and Emily Venters all in the state."

For reference, the trio holds the top three times in Kansas history in the 5k, all going sub 17, as well as the top three times in the 3200, all under 10:20, and three of the top four times in the 1600, all under 4:50. Again they did this all in one year.

"I think what happens is you get one or two kids that sort of pop up, and then they drag other people after, you know," Murrow said. "So I think part of it is we're just in we're in an upcycle right now. We've got some good talent and kids that are focused on the sport, and they're making each other better. And that's the kind of synergy that you just kind of can't, you can't buy it."

This isn't the only other case of an upcycle either, as in 1979 and 1980, teammates Steve Smith and Brent Steiner took over in Kansas running. Steiner ran a state record in the 3200 with an 8:43. Smith didn't run any state records, but his 4:07 in the mile would be a top time at state in recent years. So that leaves the question of how long these times will last.

"When you're in an upcycle, you just think it's never going to end. And sometimes it doesn't, you know, sometimes things go up and they kind of stay up for a long period of time," Murrow said. "And other times you'll be in an upcycle and you know a couple of years later, you'll look around and go, man, what happened?"

We could be in an upcycle, or maybe Spike Lee was right when he said "It's gotta be the shoes," either way, the last couple of seasons for track and cross country have been electric, so it will be interesting to see how the next couple play out.

LOOKING AT THE NUMBERS

How XC North's team did this season

5 ATHLETES WON 1ST PLACE MEDALS

7 ATHLETES WON 2ND PLACE MEDALS

5 ATHLETES WON 3RD PLACE MEDALS

13 ATHLETES QUALIFIED FOR STATE