



Once Upon a Time in North Park

Morley Field – High School Cross Country Mecca

By Steve Hon

Drop by Morley Field on many weekday afternoons or Saturday mornings during the Fall and you are likely to see a high school cross county race in action. For decades, Morley Field has been the site of high school cross county races. Even when the only major development at Morley Field was Kearns Municipal pool, high school teams were holding cross country races up and down the trails in Morley Field.

For many years, Morley Field has been the site of the local San Diego California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) cross county championships. In addition, Morley Field has been home to the majority of national high school cross country championships held in early December. Cross County is the only high school sport in which a true national championship is held. The first national championship race was held in 1979 in Balboa Park and was sponsored by Kinney shoes stores. The first race was a low-key affair with representatives selected at four regional races (North, South, East and West). The race was held again in 1980 in Balboa Park and moved to Orlando, Florida for 1981 and 1982. In 1983, the race returned to San Diego and Morley Field where in would stay for the next 14 years. It was back to Orlando, Florida for 5 years from 1997 through 2001. The race, now sponsored nationally by Foot Locker, returned to Morley Field in 2002 and will remain at Morley Field until 2007.

The race course consists of two laps totaling 5,000 meters or 3.1 miles. Unlike the almost completely flat course in Florida, the Morley Field course is famous for the steep climb up the hill toward Pershing Drive paralleling Upas Street followed by the downhill back down Upas. Many a race has been decided on the ability of runners to keep their pace

going up that steep incline. There are both girls and boys races with 40 competitors in each race, 10 from each region.

Numerous San Diego County high school runners have competed in the races since 1979 and several have finished in the top 10. The first San Diego competitor to finish in the top 10 was Mark Dani from El Cajon who finished 3rd in 1985. Marc Davis from San Diego High School became the first local runner to win a championship in 1986. Kira Jorgensen from Vista became the first girl runner to finish in the top 10 when she came in 4th in 1986. Kira came back to win the girls race in 1987. Meb Keflezighi, also from San Diego High School, came in 2nd in the 1993 race. Meb went on to a standout college career at UCLA and won the Silver Medal in the Marathon at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

The 2004 race was held December 11, 2004 and the boys race was won by Kenneth Cormier of Douglas, Arizona and the girls race was won by Aislinn Ryan of Bellvale, New York. A.J.Acosta from Oceanside finished 9th in the boys race. From its relatively modest beginnings, the race has evolved into a race with national coverage and a rich history of many competitors who later starred in college and represented the United States in the Olympics. The race was first televised nationally by ESPN in 1985. The 2004 race was televised nationally on a delayed basis by the Fox Sports Network. With few exceptions, the race at Morley Field has been held in sunshine and shows the rest of the Country what residents of North Park already know, how beautiful a park Morley Field is.