

Community Sports

Prep XC: Palo Alto senior Kent Slaney gives 'maximum effort'



Palo Alto senior Kent Slaney rounds the corner to the finish at the Central Coast Section cross country championships at the Crystal Springs Course in Belmont, where he finished as the runner-up two weeks ago after claiming the boys Division I title as a junior.

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Kent Slaney is going the distance, he's going for speed.

The 17-year-old senior at Palo Alto High will race Saturday morning at Woodward Park in Fresno during the 30th annual CIF state cross country championships.

And he's eager to prove himself worthy of consideration as one of California's best.

"You're standing in the starting line with some of the most amazing runners in the state," Slaney said. "It's pretty incredible. And once the race starts, it's like, 'OK, what can I do? Who has the most guts? Who can pull it out?' It's a great thing, it's why I race."

It's a hunger that keeps Slaney fighting every step of the way. Not just in races, but at practices and on his own free time. At the peak of his training regimen, Slaney logged in the range of 55 to 60 miles per week.

"Kent is one of those great kids to coach because he's going to come out and give maximum effort," Paly coach Michael Davidson said. "It's not a question of whether or not he can or whether he's going to. His commitment is he wants to be his very best every time out. He's going to come in, he's going to put the work in day in and day out, week in and week out. He's going to do what it takes in order to be his best, so his dedication is rock solid."

Two weeks ago at the Central Coast Section championships, Slaney set a personal record at the 2.95-mile Crystal Springs Course in Belmont with a time of 15:10.8.

It was more than 10 seconds faster from his time as a junior, when Slaney was crowned the CCS Division I boys champion. Except this time he had to settle for a runner-up finish.

"Obviously I was a little bit disappointed I didn't win," Slaney said. "I mean, that's kind of the goal, right? But I can't complain, PR'd. At this point, just looking forward to states."

The 3.1-mile course at Woodward Park offers a specific set of challenges, with hard-packed dirt trails along with patches of grass and asphalt.

"They have a big hill on the back end of the second mile, so that always makes things interesting," Slaney said. "When you're doing that hill at normal pace, it wouldn't feel too bad. But once you've gone out (fast), that hill gets bigger and bigger."

The strategy is to not get caught up with the sprint at the start in order to make a push after the opening mile.

It helps that Slaney won't be alone, with the Vikings qualifying as the CCS Division I runner-up for a third consecutive year.

"It's definitely nice to have someone next to you training and on the start line," said Slaney, who will also compete with teammates at next week's Foot Locker West Regional. "There's definitely a great sense of community among our team. It's kind of a shame that I'll be leaving next year, but I'm sure that I'll find that somewhere else, as well. But we'll go out this Saturday and see what we can do as a team and push each other."

"I'm excited for the possibility for the kids," Davidson said. "That's been a goal that they've had since last year, to return to the state meet and to perform well at the state meet. Over the last year, they were able to make that goal a reality, and now it's a matter of putting it all into action."

Last year, Slaney crossed the finish line in 63rd place at the state meet with a time of 16:08.0, while the Vikings took 15th.

The boys returned to Woodward Park on Oct. 8 to race at the Clovis Invitational, with Slaney running more than 30 seconds faster in 15:55.8. And that was while he was still ramping up his training.

Is there a specific time he's aiming for on Saturday?

"It really kind of varies by how the race goes, so I'll evaluate it when I get there," said Slaney, who as a junior also qualified for the state championships in track and field in the 1,600 meters. "Ideally, I want to get both a good time and a good place, but it doesn't always work out that way."

The plan is to leave for Fresno in the morning, refamiliarize himself with the course, then find the answers to, "OK, what can I do? Who has the most guts? Who can pull it out?"

"It's going to be a huge race," Slaney said. "It's the culmination of my season, so it will be great to see what I worked for."

He added: "I'm just really thankful for all the coaches I've had, all the support I've had. I've had a great time making friends with the team. It's really a unique group and I couldn't be happier with how things turned out."