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Prep track & field: Paly boys combine forces in distance medley relay

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The success of a track and field team relies on the sum of its parts, but on rare occasions the varying aptitudes must unite for one race -- the distance medley relay.

Four members with unique skill sets combine to run 10 laps around the track. It starts with the 1,200 meters, then the baton gets passed to the sprinter for one lap, who hands off to the 800-meter runner, before the miler anchors the race.

"I remember running it in high school," said Palo Alto coach Kelsey Feeley, who graduated from rival Gunn in 2008. "We got to run it at Arcadia. I ran it three out of my four years, and it was always such a blast. You really get to bring someone from the sprint group and the middle distance and the distance group and bring them all together to run a race. And it's people that normally wouldn't really cross paths on the track team."

The boys at Palo Alto didn't run the DMR at last year's Stanford Invitational. That won't be the case again today at Cobb Track and Angell Field.

"I think growing up in Palo Alto we kind of take Stanford for granted a little bit," said Feeley, in her first season in charge of the Vikings. "We don't realize just how incredible the facilities are and how lucky we are to have it right across the street from us. ... And it's such a great meet for the kids because there's college athletes there as well, so not only do they get to compete against the best high school athletes, they get to watch the best collegiate athletes. And I think it's great motivation for them."

Paly features a couple of contenders in the Central Coast Section, including the reigning champion in the 100-meter dash. That would be junior Eli Givens, who is in charge of the fourth lap in the DMR.

"I want to come in first," said Givens, who cracked 50 seconds in the 400 meters for the first time last year at Stanford.

"I want to come in first, too," replied Kent Slaney, the only freshman to reach the CCS finals in the 1,600 meters in 2014.

"Are you serious?" implored fellow sophomore Kai Oda, responsible for the two laps before Laney anchors the DMR in the mile.

"I don't want to come in second, I don't want to come in third, I don't want to come in fourth," Givens said. "I want to come in first."

This is the second -- and last -- time that the Vikings will run the DMR. Two weeks ago, the boys entered the race with the top-seeded time but finished fourth at the St. Francis Invitational in Mountain View.

"Last time, I was the last leg and I died a lot in the last two laps," said junior Sam Desre, who feels better prepared this time around as the choice to begin from the starting line for the 1,200-meter portion. "So I'll try to go fast again and just hopefully give it to Eli in the top three. That will be the goal, and then Eli can go and get it up to first."

Givens, who entered the week with the second-best times in CCS for the 100 and 200 meters, is not the biggest fan of running a full lap around the track.

"All you can do is pace off of someone, that's what I do," Givens said. "Let people work for it."

Reminiscent of the racehorse Seabiscuit, the strategy at times requires him to slow down before igniting the afterburners for the final 150 meters.

"Oh, trust me, I'll run hard. Unless I'm in front by a little bit, then I'll let the dude catch up," Givens said. "If you think about it, you're just letting them work up for it. If you're staying with them, it gets them thinking. You're not using as much energy, they're going to push harder, they're going to get more tired. Once you get to that marker, you're going to have a lot more energy than you think you would ever have at the end of the 400, and that's when you get to use it all."

"I'm not saying that's the best way to run it ... but when it comes to CCS you have to go full out."

Oda, who didn't partake in the DMR two weeks ago, could be the wild card in the equation.

"I think it's going to start with me at the front and then dropping back," Oda joked, noting that teammate Brett McBride, who was in the foursome at St. Francis, runs the 800 meters about three seconds faster.

"Oh God," Givens said. "You better get moving."

Slaney, Oda and Desre were all members of the cross country team that qualified for the state championships, while Givens spent the fall as a wide receiver on the football team.

Now they're united for a common cause.

"We just all train our own events and we take the best of whichever event and we throw them in one race," Oda said.

"And hope the handoffs don't go too badly," Slaney added.

"We're kind of winging it here," Oda joked.

"A little bit," Slaney agreed.

Their paths will diverge after the DMR at Stanford, but hopefully not until a finish on the podium.

"They all want to win it," Feeley said. "They are very self-motivated. I don't have to do a lot of pulling at them. They're ready to run, they want to run and they want to represent Paly and they just want to do the best they can."

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