



NIKE TEAM NATIONALS

Presented by *Eastbay*

Defending champion Manlius NY girls seem unstoppable;
Dana Point CA is the pick in a balanced boys field.

by Rich Gonzalez in Portland

Rankings are out -- regional races are in! Controversy is out -- head-on clashing is in!
Mud-caked championship course is out??? -- Snow is in !?!!

As quickly as the Nike Teams Nationals format has continually evolved in just three-plus years, the refinements have resulted in a new era of growth for the sport of cross-country. Record participation numbers are evident across the map, performance levels have skyrocketed as once thought-to-be untouchable course records now tumble like dominoes, and the "all-timer" lists are quickly becoming a "has been" lists!

And most importantly, the era of mythical paper champions has been purged, now replaced by an infusion of regionalized blockbuster clashes across hill and dale to identify who is truly number one.

This year's return to Portland Meadows for the fourth edition of the NTN extravaganza even has another anticipated new twist. Internet weather forecasts over the last week called for highs in the upper 30s and sunny conditions but have in the last few hours given way to predictions of snow flurries on Thursday and additional snow on race day according to the local TV station weather reports.

First regionals, then a revamped at-large format, and now snow instead of mud at NTN?

Can anyone run with defending champions Manlius NY girls?

Does this foretell a possible overhaul of the results trend we've seen in recent years, where New York girls teams have dominated? Is the reign of the Big Apple over? Will pesky 130-pound worms from other regions eat away at the core of what has been our nation's finest? Are New York's female runners finally going down the for count?

NOT!!!

Manlius XC Club of New York appears to be the class of the nation in 2007, with Coach Bill Aris' crew this year repeatedly dismantling all challengers, even often doing so when being shorthanded at major meets. Without question, his group has thus far shown to be the best in the land this fall and perhaps the second-finest from the state's all-time annals, trailing only the super 2004 crew from Kinetic Racing Club (Saratoga Springs) that dominated the inaugural NTN challenge. Strong frontrunners, sensational depth, a master coach, and an eye on the big prize are a perfect combination for success which last year unlocked the team's first national crown.

Can anyone in the land run with Manlius in 2007? On a snowy or muddy course, probably not. And even on any type of course, the jury is still out.

It might take an earthquake from California, Perhaps only an earthquake can shake the New Yorkers from their perch.

Enter the top team from California, the earthquake epicenter of America. Newhall XC Club of Saugus, CA comes in as a team on a tear, destroying the all-time course records at both Mt. SAC -- site to the nation's largest invitational -- and Woodward Park, the permanent home of the California state meet and one-time residence of the FootLocker (then named Kinney) Wes Regionals meet.

Newhall has amazing balance at the front of races, often with 6 or 7 girls storming through courses at national-class pace. The group is very fit, very tough and very focused, but under Southern Section rules will be without Coach Rene Paragas and staff as after-the-state-meet contact with athletes in preparation for subsequent competitions is prohibited. The squad is anxious for another crack at a high-end finish, especially after the flu bug plagued that team throughout NTN week in 2006.

Midwest powers

Additional powers from the Midwest and Southwest regions will seek to pull the upset, with three-time defending Indiana state champion Westfield seeking to earn redemption after being beaten by in-state rival Lake Central at the Midwest Regional. The Northeast Region checks in with surprise regional winner Eastern Mass (athletes from Lincoln Sudbury) as part of a group of teams that held their own against the New York Region powers at the midseason Manhattan Invitational.