

Pennsauken Cross Country team displays sportsmanship in aiding young Delran runner



The running conditions were perfect when Pennsauken was host to a middle school cross country batch meet on Oct. 12 at its Palmyra Nature Cove course.

The set up that day was even better for what turned out to be a memorable display of heart-warming sportsmanship by the Pennsauken boys cross country team, who were on the scene to practice, and as it turned out, do much more for a young athlete from Delran.

Here's the background:

"Our district started a middle school cross country program in 2016," explained Pennsauken coach Phil Zimmerman. "In 2017, the league that our middle school participated in lost its site for its championship meet. We stepped up and offered to host the meet and provide our middle school runners with a top-notch experience and showcase our home course at Palmyra Nature Cove. Since then, we've hosted one to three middle school meets each season. It's something we really look forward to. We've got a great place to run at Palmyra Cove. It's great to get our own middle school kids out to see it, and the experience has helped us build our high school roster. Our current top three boys all came through our Phifer Middle School cross country program."

Aside from introducing young athletes to the sport, the middle school program also stresses the importance of sportsmanship, as well as the unique commonality that exists among runners.

"From my experience, the bond that exists between the sport and cross country runners is all about respect, whether you win or lose," said Ladanian McGrath, a Pennsauken junior and one of its top

runners this year. He's also a product of the middle school program.

"We are all family," he said. "We may get competitive at the start of a race, but at the end, we all show sportsmanship by congratulating everyone and saying 'Good race.' Cross country is a good sport itself, but being competitive and meeting new people in a positive way makes the sport and cross country runners even better."

On that particular day, with the meet going on alongside their practice, the Pennsauken team noticed something happening in the race.

One of Delran's runners was having trouble keeping up with the others. And instead of just watching him struggle, and possibly give up, they stopped what they were doing, ran up to him, offered encouragement and stayed by his side and escorted him to the finish line. The crowd that had been there, upon learning there was still that one runner left on the course, remained and greeted him with loud cheers and applause.

The fact that he was a younger kid from a different school hardly mattered to the boys from Pennsauken.

"When I first spotted him, he appeared discouraged and began to walk into the woods," McGrath said. "I made the decision to sprint over to him and support him by repeating, 'You got this,' as I tried to encourage him throughout the race. I believe that by cheering the kid on, it inspired my teammates to do the same and it was all positivity going forward, cheering him on."

"Despite the fact that the kid wasn't from Pennsauken, we still chose to support him because cross country is not just a sport, but it's a family."



McGrath said. "I believe that you should be able to support people on any team they are a part of, because it's about having fun. Seeing him finish the race made me happy, because I knew that he could do it. Even though he was exhausted, he sprinted to the finish line with a big smile on his face as the audience cheered him on with the help of my teammates, and seeing this made my day."

The act was part of an overall culture that exists within the Pennsauken program.

"We promote a team mentality each day with our boys," Zimmerman said. "They do everything together in practice and at meets. They warm up together. Cool down together. Run easy runs together. About the only time there is ever some separation is in a workout or in a race, simply due to

different ability levels. To them, the mentality is to leave no one behind. I think what the guys did is very much an extension of that same mindset. I think it also shows a joy in the sport, and that they want to share that with other runners, no matter the school. The crowd was all hanging around the finish line, so once we realized there was still one runner out, I told the crowd to make sure they gave him a huge round of applause once he came into sight. When we saw my boys running him in and cheering him on, the crowd erupted. The crowd deserves as much credit as my boys in creating the environment."

Scott Mongo, the coach of the Delran middle school team, was very impressed.

"The DMS student is a first-year runner whom the team has embraced," he said. "He's a lovable kid who does not complain or quit. He knows he will always be at the back of the race, but for him, it's the completion of the race that's important. I respect it. True runners do. It was great that the Pennsauken runners cheered him on the way they did at the end of the race. I appreciate it."

It also wasn't the first time that the Pennsauken kids impressed Mongo that day.

"Before the meet, I arrived really early," he said. "The first fan to show up was the grandmother of that runner, who has limited walking ability. She was crossing from the parking lot to my area. And the leader of Pennsauken squad stopped the entire team while running. Instead of running around her, he offered to help her across the street. All of this was done with no one around except me. It was so



refreshing to see a kid strong enough to make a team do the right thing. Someone did a great job raising the young man. I've been coaching since the 1990's, and I've rarely seen such great sportsmanship."

"What happened that day really exemplifies what makes cross country great," Zimmerman said. "Cross country promotes a strong culture of camaraderie, teamwork and friendship. Distance runners are just a different breed, and they respect anybody willing to put themselves out there and race."

It also showcased the importance of being a good sport.

"I think what my guys did that day was the ultimate example of sportsmanship," said Zimmerman. "It was an entirely altruistic act on Ladanian's part to decide that he was going to help this kid to the finish line. He saw someone in need of help and encouragement, and thought it was the right thing to do. The other boys joined in with Ladanian, and all together made sure the young runner from Delran finished what he started. I couldn't be more proud of their act of selflessness and kindness. It really showed the true nature of their character, and I

couldn't be happier."

For Ladanian, it was simply a matter of acting on what he felt was a proper thing to do.

"Coming from the middle school cross country program, I knew that it would be enjoyable for me and my teammates to encourage the middle school athletes," he said. "This day was important to me because I believe that all athletes deserve to be encouraged when in doubt. It was a memorable moment since the kid had repeatedly wanted to quit the race and walk, but I had pushed him to keep going for the final mile by motivating him and telling him that I knew he could finish."

It was also an impressive act of sportsmanship, which is also a very important thing for Ladanian and his teammates.

"Sportsmanship is very important to me because it makes the sport more fun, and it helps create a bond for everyone," he said. "Sportsmanship has a lot respect involved in it, and it's not all about winning. It's about helping others and making them enjoy their sport."

