Every year, schools are faced with defending expenditures for athletics and other activity programs – particularly in the past few years with the downward spiral in the economy. In some cases, these programs have been seen as a “luxury” item in the overall educational offerings of a school.

Fortunately, however, success stories continue to unfold that document the value of these programs in the nation’s high schools. While those students currently involved in high school activity programs generally earn better grades, have fewer discipline problems and learn the skills of teamwork, perhaps the most significant benefit comes years later as productive citizens in successful careers.

Such is the case with members of the 1994 boys and girls cross country teams at Shawnee Mission (Kansas) Northwest High School (pictured above), a large-class school in suburban Kansas City. Today, 17 years after jump-starting one of the most successful runs of state championships in Kansas history, most of the 14 members of the Cougars’ boys and girls teams are engaged in successful careers and reflect favorably on their high school experiences.

Since 1994, the Cougars’ boys and girls cross country programs have won 21 Kansas State High School Activities Association state championships, including 14 consecutive titles by the boys program. And since 1977, Northwest has won 32 state titles, including the 2010 championship by the Cougars’ boys team.

“It is something that sticks with you your whole life,” said Melissa Cooley, a sophomore on the 1994 girls team. “I see the new runners out there, running the same routes we ran 15 years ago. It amazes me that we put all that hard work in at that age.”

“As a high school athlete, winning a state championship was what one would strive for,” said Dan Gruman, a sophomore on the 1994 boys team. “That was the end goal.”

Leading the program throughout the years has been Van Rose, a teacher and coach at Northwest for the past 43 years.

“In the early years of the streak, I was in awe that the boys could continue to win year after year,” said Brian Sumner, a junior on the 1994 boys team, “but when you really think about it, it shouldn’t be too surprising when you see the person who has been the one constant – coach Rose. You don’t win 14 straight state championships by being lucky. You need a lot of hard work and dedication, which are characteristics that easily describe coach Rose.”

 “[Rose] has a way of getting the best performances out of people,
so he can take a group of talented athletes and take them to the next level,” Cooley said. “He has developed a formula that works.”

Although his runners believe that he holds the key to success, Rose points to the contributions of other individuals.

“I attribute our success to great assistant coaches and to the fantastic Northwest cross country parents,” Rose said. “They are involved and do so much. Without their help, we would be very ordinary.”

Sumner agrees.

“We had teammates, family and friends on every part of the course [in 1994],” Sumner said. “How could we not be motivated to run well when we heard ‘Go Northwest’ throughout the entire 5K?”

The 1994 championships seemed to mark the beginning of something special for the Northwest cross country teams. As a few underclassmen on the 1994 teams continued their high school careers and, in some cases, won two more state titles, others went on to college and started successful careers in the working world. They believe that their time as high school athletes was an experience that will stick with them for the rest of their lives.

Bryce Bell, a senior on the 1994 boys team who is currently an attorney who practices in real estate, corporate law and employment law, said, “I started my own firm last year but continue on as general counsel for several corporations. I think that [competitive] racing is an especially great metaphor for life. Anytime you see something that you want that you don’t have, you need to have the courage to go after it. Most of the time, it’s fear holding you back. If you don’t take that first step to get to where you want to go, [and] if you don’t have the courage to overcome those fears, then it’s not really possible to grow into the person you want to become and accomplish your goals.”

Sumner currently works at a Kansas City advertising agency as the Direct Marketing Department manager.

“Coach Rose’s emphasis on preparation is something I draw on in just about every phase of my life, whether it’s work, running or coaching my daughter’s soccer team,” Sumner said. “Our teams were always going to be the most prepared and I make sure that I take the same approach when heading to a meeting, planning a local 5K or getting ready for one of my daughter’s games. You always want to go into any challenge as prepared as possible, and coach Rose made sure he left no stones unturned.”

Other members of the 1994 team have gone on to pursue careers in engineering and finance, as well as in the medical field as nurses, physicians and administrators.

Mark Toepfer, a junior on the 1994 boys team, is a real estate consultant assisting clients with home buying.

“[High school activities] taught me how to function successfully as part of a team,” Toepfer said, “[and] that with hard work, self-discipline and perseverance, just about anything can be achieved.”

Katie Messer, a junior on the 1994 girls team, is a financial advisor with Northwestern Mutual and has been self-employed for 12 years.

“Participating in sports taught me how to prepare, compete and challenge myself,” Messer said. “[High school athletics taught me] how to work with others, and how to handle defeat [and] disappointments; how to balance my life.”

Currently working as a business analyst for Ericsson, Inc., is Brian Schober, a sophomore on the 1994 boys team.

“I believe that my participation in high school sports helped to solidify my character in a way that you can’t easily learn through other activities,” Schober said. “It taught me how to achieve success through hard work, and how succeeding as a team often exceeds the feeling of accomplishment obtained by succeeding as an individual.”

Steve Fein, a senior and individual state champion on the 1994 boys team, and who is currently a tax partner at Moss Adams LLP, concurs.
“In a time of life that can be very challenging for some individuals as they’re learning about themselves and trying so hard to fit in with their peers, high school sports provided an opportunity to be involved in something with others, and to feel like you belonged with a group of people,” Fein said. “I think it plays a role today in my career from the standpoint that this was where much of the development of my personal interaction skills and manner of developing relationships occurred. That time of my life probably played as much importance as any other in shaping how I would go about developing relationships not only within my firm, but also with clients and others in my personal and business networks.”

Through the trials and tribulations of high school athletics, some members of the 1994 team see similarities between their high school careers and current occupations.

“I graduated in August with a bachelor’s degree in nursing [after a career change],” Cooley said. “I started a new job three weeks ago as a registered nurse on the Medical Intermediate Cardiac Care floor at St. Luke’s Hospital on the [Kansas City’s Country Club] Plaza. It is a little overwhelming right now, but I can already tell that I am going to love it. I do see some parallels between my career change and cross country. With both, a lot of hard work paid off in the end.”

As more and more Northwest athletes become graduates and continue forward with their lives, new members of the cross country teams continue the tradition that began in 1994.

“If you get the opportunity to run for coach Rose, take advantage of what he is teaching you because it applies to more than just running,” Sumner said. “He has obviously built an incredible program, for both the boys and girls, but don’t base your legacy on what was accomplished before you arrived. Go out there and create your own legacy.”

Throughout it all, the legacy that Rose and the 1994 boys and girls cross country teams created for Northwest can be summed up into a simple philosophy.

“Consistency, having a plan and outworking your competition [equals] success,” Rose said. “Enjoy the moment. Work is not work when you do it with friends. [Know that] you can always get better. The pursuit of excellence has no finish line.”

It is a philosophy that helped members of the 1994 cross country teams use their high school participation as a springboard to the success they enjoy today.

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