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Posted on Thu, Sep. 9, 2010

### Haddonfield cross-country duo stepping up

By Marc Narducci  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

It would be too simplistic to suggest that Haddonfield seniors Matt Nussbaum and Ben Potts ran in the shadows of a more celebrated teammate.

Both were named first-team all-South Jersey performers last season by the South Jersey Cross-Country Coaches Association. Nussbaum placed second in the Group 2 state meet, and Potts was third. Potts was 28th in the NJSIAA Meet of Champions, and Nussbaum was 29th.

Each also was a member of Haddonfield's 4 x mile relay that won national championships in both indoor and outdoor track. In the spring, Nussbaum was the state Group 2 champion in the 1,600 meters and Potts was the Group 2 state champ in the 800.

Do these runners sound like complementary athletes?

While it wouldn't seem that way, the fact remains that in cross country both still found themselves behind teammate Jonathan "Boo" Vitez, now at Princeton.

Then again, everybody else seemed to be behind Vitez, who was named runner of the year by the South Jersey Coaches Association and was the Group 2 state champion.

Haddonfield also had another celebrated senior last year, Colin Baker, now at Penn, son of Bulldogs coach Nick Baker.

So while Nussbaum and Potts would have been the main men on most teams, they played a major but not leading role for what has been a state-wide powerhouse.

Now as seniors, they are the co-leaders on a team that despite the losses of talented runners such as Vitez and Baker has the ability to remain among the elite in South Jersey and possibly beyond.

"For a time, it was good to be Boo's sidekick, but now Ben and I ready for a different role," said Nussbaum, who lists Yale, Richmond, and Harvard as three potential college destinations.

Instead of chasing Vitez, the two seniors, who are good friends, will be running after each other, and also pulling for one another.

"When you are a freshman, all you want to do is beat each other, but as the years have gone on, we have been able to enjoy each other's accomplishments," Potts said. "We are very invested in each other's success."

The two came to the sport differently. Nussbaum is a late bloomer, having started running in the spring of eighth grade. He said his mother wanted him in an activity, either track or the spring musical.

"I'm glad I chose track," he said, laughing.

Potts says he started running in the third grade and got more serious in middle school. Since high school, he and Nussbaum have developed a special kinship.

"We love supporting each other and working out together," Nussbaum said. "We are still very competitive, and our goal is to be 1-2 in every race."

Who finishes first or second can change from race to race.

Nick Baker won't enter that debate.

"They should be two of the best runners in South Jersey," Baker said, showing no hint of favoritism.

Both runners also will take more of a leadership role this season. Haddonfield has won four consecutive state titles, and neither Nussbaum nor Potts wants to see the standards drop.

"We're still looking to win, just as in the past," Nussbaum said.

While that shouldn't change, the role of Nussbaum and Potts surely will. They are clearly in front of the pack now, pushing each other in a positive way toward the finish line.

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