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CLIMAX - Each high school coach brings his own beliefs, his own practice regimen and his own way to motivate student-athletes with him for the season. First-year head coach John Ruiz has brought the right elements to the Providence Grove High School cross country teams.

Ruiz, who also coaches football and wrestling at PG, stepped into the cross country coaching role when the sports seasons were adjusted due to Covid-19. Now he has the Patriots primed for what is turning out to be a banner season.

"When I got to Providence Grove, they had a cross country coach, but this year with the craziness and sports being realigned, they needed someone to step in," said Ruiz, who ran cross country at South Rowan High School. "I was excited to do something that I did in high school."



Coach John Ruiz, Providence Grove High School.

The PG runners have certainly taken to Ruiz as his way of training has left the girls and boys teams with a perfect 3-0 mark this season.

"I think our team has done very well for our area," Ruiz said. "Going into the regional race, we will see some tougher competition. Wheatmore has been a pretty good team in our area for a while. I would like to see how we do in the regional meet. I think we will be prepared."

But first comes the conference meet, which is set for Jan. 6, at Wheatmore High School.

"I've been telling the kids since Day 1, winning the conference was our goal," Ruiz said.

"Normally, PG is toward the bottom of the conference. But we have some runners who have been running for years and I knew this year was going to be different."

Ruiz has made quite a difference as well.

"We haven't been real strong in cross country, I think a lot of it is having a different coach every year," Ruiz said. "There have been a lot of inconsistencies over the years. I had a really good coach in high school, who is now coaching cross country at Catawba, and coaching cross country is more than just

telling them to go run three miles and calling it a day. There are certain workouts you need to do at the beginning of the season, certain workouts for the middle of the season and certain ones for the end of the season. A lot of people don't understand that. Having that and the group of kids I have this year, they are awesome. They all have positive attitudes and credit our success to them. They just needed someone to push them in the right direction. They have done all the work."

Junior Lily Butler leads the girls. She has won all three meets this season. In the season opener, she ran a time of 21 minutes, 57 seconds, more than three minutes faster than the next runner. She has also won by 14 seconds and by 1:30. Butler was one of the top freshman runners in 2018, but she missed all of last year due to medical issues.

"It was amazing getting back," Butler said. "I really missed it a lot. It was hard not doing it last year. It was great to get back to the team again."

And the team is glad she is back. So is Ruiz, who said Butler has shown the desire to continue running cross country in college. Her admiration for her coach is easy to see.

"He knows what he is talking about and he's not afraid to push us," Butler said. "He knows the workouts we need to do to get where we need to be. He incorporates a lot of different workouts, whether it's for speed, tempo, endurance. He's really structured and he motivates us and gives us good feedback on what we are doing and what we need to do to improve."



Lily Butler, Providence Grove High School.



Jacob Allen, Providence Grove High School.

PG's Jensen Auman, Caroline DuVall, Sarah Majors, Rori Frederick-Luther, Tia Meredith and Olivia Frankel have all had solid seasons.

On the boys' side, senior Jacob Allen has led the way. He has won two of the three meets the Patriots have participated in and finished second in the other.

"Jacob has run all four years and he lives and breathes cross country," Ruiz said. "I think he was one of the more excited ones to do different workouts."

Allen says the new practice regimen is one of the main reasons he has enjoyed the first two individual wins of his high school career.

"Coach Ruiz was a high school athlete and it's that experience he brings to the table," Allen said. "We couldn't start our regular practice because of Covid until after school began. We did some distance runs on our own and when Coach Ruiz was able

to coach us, we had some hard-hitting workouts and we've been doing that for the past three months. So when the race came, we were ready."

Allen said he had some personal reasons to do better as well.

"I critique myself every race," he said. "Every meet in the past four years, I've been in the top 15 and maybe the top 10. In March, when the Covid hit, I started running every day. Last year wasn't a good year for me with my times compared to my sophomore and freshman years and I knew this was going to be my last year if we were able to run. I wasn't going to let my team or my coach down this year."

Allen isn't the only Patriot having a fine season. He is joined in a very competitive boys lineup by Evan Meadows, Robert Burton, Kaden Shoptaw, Nathan Majors, Preston Ward, Adam Wilhoit and others.

"We have a really good program this year," Allen said. "The runners we have are committed. I really think we have what it takes to win. With the training we have and the motivation we give each other, we are in prime position this year."