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Conference championships the final stop for Aztecs

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Daily Aztec Sportswriter

The roller coaster ride for the San Diego State cross country team will be coming to a screeching halt Saturday as the Aztecs finish a bizarre season at the Western Athletic Conference Championships in Salt Lake City.

After suffering through yet another coaching change last May, when Gary Stathas was fired due to budget cuts, the program was headed for the ride of its life.

After a slow start this season, it would have been easy for the SDSU runners to give in, but the team overcame obstacle after obstacle, leading it to the WAC Championships.

"To me, this season really proved that when anybody puts their mind to it, they can

succeed at this sport," head coach Ted Dixon said. "They started out as a mediocre team and finished up as a team that was competing for championships at the end of the season."

In tomorrow's WAC/District 7 Championships, the Aztecs will be faced with a problem that has been all too familiar to them in the past — altitude.

"We are the only team competing that lives at sea level, so it's harder for us," runner Jim Swinson said. "I try not to think about that."

Dixon said the team has been heading up to Pine Valley and Cuyamaca the last three weeks and running at about 4,000 feet in an effort to lesson the problem. However, Dixon said even that does very little.

"There's no way they can get acclimated

unless they live up there for a month," he said. "It's going to be in their minds, so there's not much you can do about it."

Dixon said he's been having the Aztec runners build up their mileage all year in an effort to improve on previous performances in high altitude.

"The extra mileage was my big concern this year because a lot of it had to do with them racing at altitude," he said.

Another obstacle SDSU will need to overcome Saturday is the fact that three WAC teams (Air Force, BYU and Colorado State) are currently ranked in the Top 25, while two others (New Mexico and UTEP) were previously ranked.

"In order to fare well," Dixon said, "the men's team will need five guys to have the race of their lives."

Swinson, who finished 25th in the WAC last year, said he is hoping to finish in the Top 10 this year.

"I'm a lot stronger now," he said. "I peaked early last year, but I'm peaking at the right time this year."

Saturday's competition will be the final race in Swinson's SDSU career.

"It's pretty depressing, but I'm excited because I know it's going to be a good one," Swinson said.

On the women's side, Dixon knows his team is in a rebuilding year and he is simply hoping to see them gain some valuable experience they can use some time down the road.

"Next year," Dixon said, "when they go back there with a chance to do it, they will have been there before, which is real important."

Junior Lara Venkus, who was injured when the Aztecs competed in last year's championship, is trying to block out the pressure of competing in the biggest race of the season.

"I'm trying not to get too nervous," she said. "I want to go in there like it's any other competition and do my best."

After Saturday's races, it will again be decision time for the SDSU athletic department. They will need to decide on whether to bring Dixon back for a second season.

Dixon is hoping for a favorable decision.

"I'd like to stay here," Dixon said. "They're going to be building the women's program and I'd like to be around for that. But I have no idea if I will. I'm recruiting as if I'm going to be here."