

■ Cross-country: Runners take aim at barriers.

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In the foothills of Belmont, scarcely a mile from the Interstate 280 and Highway 92 interchange, lies the mecca of Central Coast Section cross-country: Crystal Springs.

It is a demanding 2.95-mile course with more twists and turns and ups and downs than most roller coasters.

In the past 11 years, only one boy has run the course (which has hosted 23 of 28 CCS championship meets) faster than 15 minutes — Lynbrook's Jason Balkman ran 14:54 in 1994. Since 1985, no girl has run the course in less than 17 minutes, and before this season only four had run it faster than 18 minutes.

But Saturday, Los Altos' Andrew Hill and Palo Alto's Katie Brizgys have a good chance of breaking those barriers at the CCS championships, which get under way at 9:30 a.m.

Brizgys broke the 18-minute barrier last week in winning the Santa Clara Valley Athletic League El Camino Division race in 17:48. Hill is the favorite in the Division III boys race after winning the El Camino Division boys title in 15:11.

"I'd like to run the course under 15 minutes, and the CCS meet is going to be my last chance," Hill said. "If the conditions are right, I believe I can do it."

The conditions are these: First, both runners need competition to help push them to faster times. Second, both need to be healthy. And third, it must be a dry, cool day.

One of the reasons the 15-minute barrier has rarely been broken, local coaches say, is because elite runners haven't had the competition needed to push them.

"When there used to be one division, the competition was a lot more intense," Los Gatos Coach Willie Harmatz said. "As it is now, the top runners generally are scattered throughout five divisions and aren't challenged as much.

CCS CHAMPIONSHIP MEET

■ Finals at Crystal Springs on Saturday at 9:30 a.m.

"The more you are pushed in a race, the better chance you have of an improved time."

For Hill, the competition will come from St. Francis sophomore Eric Chaves and St. Ignatius junior Neil McDonagh. Chaves won the West Catholic Athletic League meet last week at Crystal Springs with a career-best 15:17. McDonagh was on his heels in 15:21.

"Eric and Neil will have a tough time beating Andrew," St. Francis Coach Brian Curley said. "If the track is dry and weather good Saturday, I think Andrew will have an excellent chance to beat 15 minutes. He is a tough guy and very intelligent.

"I believe there is a good chance Eric and Neil will run Crystal under 15 minutes next year."

Both Hill and Brizgys are running faster than they've ever run before. Brizgys' previous-best time at Crystal Springs was 18:33.

Hill attributes his improvement to increasing his training during the summer.

"I ran from 40 to 50 miles a week, compared to 30 to 40 miles before," he said. "I feel much stronger this year."

And he should feel much stronger Saturday than when he ran in the SCVAL championships. Then he was nursing a cold.

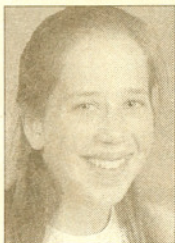
The great variable this season might be the weather. Rain and sloppy dirt trails don't equal fast times. Although rain is expected to continue through today, the long-range forecast calls for cool temperatures and, except for patchy morning fog, clear skies Saturday.

There is one other resource Hill and Brizgys can call on. Saturday, the honorary starter will be Mitch Kingery, who set the course record of 14:28 in 1973 (it was later equaled by Jay Marden of Mission San Jose in 1980). Except for College of San Mateo Coach Bob Rush, who helped design the course, no one knows Crystal Springs better than Kingery. While at San Carlos High School (which has since been closed) and College of San Mateo, Kingery owned virtually every course record. Eight times he finished the course in under 15 minutes.

Saturday, Hill hopes to join him on that list.



Hill



Brizgys