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Crystal Springs: An uphill battle

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More than 160,000 high school students have dealt with the hills, loops and weather that prevail on the Crystal Springs Cross Country Course in Belmont.

All was going well for Jennifer Tuff in her freshman year of cross country at West Valley Junior College until she heard where the conference finals were going to be held.

The meet was scheduled at Crystal Springs Cross Country Course in Belmont.

The 1997 Half Moon Bay High School graduate reacted to that news the same way she might have upon hearing that a college exam had to be retaken because of a computer glitch.

"I thought, 'No! Not there!' I was tired of running those hills," Tuff said.

Similar nightmares haunt the dreams of 160,000 students who have run the course since its beginning, back in 1970.

The course was reconstructed after its initial configuration once Interstate 280 was completed in 1972. While everything around the course has changed, the course has not.

It is 2.95 miles for high school races. It can be shortened for junior high school races and lengthened for college races. The West Coast Conference held its championships there Saturday; the women ran six kilometers, while the men went eight kilometers.

It's one of the few courses that's designed strictly for cross country. With one exception of 600 meters, fans can see the entire race.

The course will be strictly for high schools this week, as it hosts an array of league championships. The Peninsula Athletic League, of which Half Moon Bay is a member, has its meet Thursday.

The course's final major meet of the season comes on Nov. 10, when the Central Coast Section championships will be run there.

The high school course starts with a slight incline going to a deep decline down to a trail. The runners round the trail, come back up the same hill. The start of the incline is the end of the first mile.

"Runners who go out too fast there pay for it the rest of the way," said Steve Trudelle, a 2000 graduate of Woodside Priory and assistant coach at the University of San Diego.

The second mile takes the runners southeast, toward Hallmark Drive. They run a bit along the road before heading toward Cardiac Hill, another hill with a steep incline. The tightness of the course prevents fans from seeing that portion of the race.

"Sometimes I worried that if I didn't return, I hoped that someone would find me," Tuff said.

The runners come off the hill, still on a narrow trail. As they pass the two-mile mark, fans can see the runners - but if the uniforms are the same, it's difficult to know who the runners are.

When the runners are close enough for the fans to see them, the finish is within sight. There's a left turn, taking the runners to another trail before the final run home. Just for fun, runners face a slight incline before the finish.

"It's not a kind course," said Noel Tendick, a 1994 graduate of Half Moon Bay. "But it's a well-loved course."

Bob Rush, a former track and cross country coach at San Mateo High School and the College of San Mateo, maintains the course. He says it requires some mowing, some dragging and some rock removal.

On race day, Rush can be found in the officials' shed, helping compile the results and making sure that everything else runs smoothly.

He has been known to run the course himself.

"He's on top of everything there," said Aragon coach Bill Daskarolis. "It's been that way from Day 1."

The one thing he can't control is the weather. Races can be held on windy days, rainy days or hot days. Some days runners in the trail pack will eat dirt.

"It's a tough course, but it's a good course," said Ashley Hughey, a 2005 graduate of Half Moon Bay. "It's the best course in California."

LONG, HARD RUN

The Crystal Springs Cross Country Course in Belmont is regarded as a tough course by the many who have run its hills and curves.

But it's not the toughest course in the nation. In 2002, Dyestat.com, a Web site devoted to cross country, picked the Hereford High School course in Maryland as the "toughest three miles in cross country."

The course, located 30 miles north of Baltimore, is filled with ups and downs and 90-degree turns on a slope. Readers provided other courses for consideration, including:

Right of Passage, Carson City, Nev.: Course takes runners through sand and across a creek 600 meters into the race.

Trask Mountain, Yamhill, Ore.: Runners deal with two shin-deep streams, 800-meter uphill, and steep down hills.

Manzano High School, Albuquerque, N.M.: The course is located at 7,000-foot elevation. Runners run four steep hills.