



NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF PHOTOS

Lynbrook cross country standout Justin Robison, center, runs with his teammates at practice Tuesday in Saratoga. Robison is one of the area's top runners this season.

# Running world

## SCVAL boys, girls teams continue to excel on area cross country trails

By Glenn Reeves

[greeves@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:greeves@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Justin Robison comes from a league that is ideal for cross country, and the Lynbrook senior is doing his part to keep the high level of success going.

He finished first last weekend at a race in Salinas, a result he hopes to duplicate later this season at his league and section finals.

He's got a shot, given that some of the top competition from the past few seasons — runners such as Los Gatos' Chris Foster and Saratoga's Steven Sum — have graduated.

"Those are the guys I've been chasing for three years," Robison said. "Now the door is open."

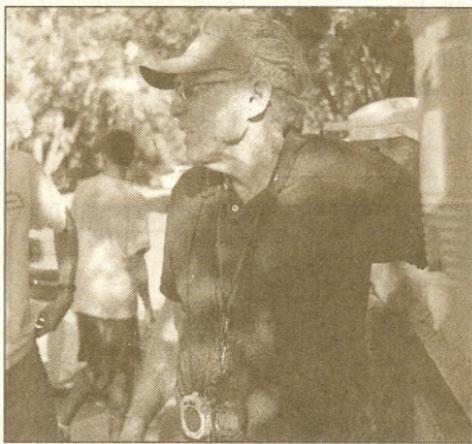
As with Robison, Foster and Sum were part of the distance running haven known as the Santa Clara Valley Athletic League, a league so strong on the cross country trails that it had seven boys teams and seven girls teams ranked among the top 15 in the initial Central Coast Section rankings.

Why is the league so strong? Part of the reason is the competition. With so many elite runners, success is predicated on keeping up with the pack. In Robison's case, that meant trying to stay close to Foster and Sum.

"I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't had them pulling me along, showing me the ropes and beating me," Robison said.

Gunn's Gillian Meeks won both the SCVAL and Central Coast Section Division I championships last year as a junior. That was after she played a distant second fiddle for two years to teammate Sarah Robison, the state 1,600-meter champion in 2014.

"I looked up to her so



Lynbrook coach Jake White addresses a runner at practice Tuesday in Saratoga. The Lynbrook boys team is ranked seventh in the CCS Top 15.

much," Meeks said. "The thing with Sarah was that she made you think you can be that fast, that it's not impossible."

The top six finishers in last year's CCS girls Division I race and the top four teams were all from the SCVAL.

There are a number of runners from the SCVAL who might be league champions elsewhere, but probably wouldn't run as fast without the competition they face within their league boundaries.

"If you win everything, you might feel great," Monta Vista junior Kelly Bishop said. "But if you're not pushed to go faster, you don't know what you can do. The competition in this league pushes runners to learn their limits. You get to know so much about yourself."

### Stability a key

Another factor that makes the SCVAL so strong is its continuity. Many schools in the league have been strong for decades, and there is a high degree of stability and longevity among the current group of coaches. Palo Alto's Paul Jones and Wilcox's Walt Van Zant have been at their schools close to 40 years.

History and tradition also play a role. "It goes back to Forrest Jamieson, the father of high school cross country and track in the Bay Area," said Hank Lawson, a former runner at Gunn and coach at Lynbrook in the league.

Jamieson, the longtime Palo Alto coach, was inducted into the National High School Sports Hall of Fame in 2013.

### Location matters

It also helps that many schools in the SCVAL are located near foothills, in proximity to ideal running trails. "You look at the really good teams around the state, and they almost all back up into the hills," Gunn coach and former Olympian PattiSue Plumer said, mentioning the programs at Saugus, Great Oak-Temecula and Carmont. "If you have to run on asphalt or concrete, it's hard to get that aerobic training in."

The schools in the SCVAL are excellent academically, and many believe there is a tie-in between academic achievement and the pursuit of excellence in distance running.

"It's a sport that requires the ability to deal with delayed gratification," Jones said. "You have to be able to see the long road ahead and be able to deal with that instead of having success pop out next week."

Many SCVAL schools are located near middle schools with cross country and track and field programs that feed the high schools.

That is by no means the case everywhere.

"It's a league with a lot of high performing schools," Plumer said. "Dedicated kids do well in distance running."