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Cross country takes hit with Crystal Springs closure

By Nathan Mollat, Daily Journal Staff
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Carlmont's Jessie Peterson runs up the infamous "hill" at the Crystal Springs Cross Country Course during the 2010 PAL championships. "The hill" is the bane of cross country runners as not only do they have to run down it to start the race, they then have to run back up to complete the race. The San Mateo Community College District, which is responsible for the course, said it will be shutting down the facility.

Daily Journal Sports File



The Northern California cross country community was dealt a crippling blow

with the closure of the Crystal Springs Cross Country course, the Daily Journal has learned.

In a letter College of San Mateo athletic director Andreas Wolf sent to the Crystal Springs Cross Country Course Board of Directors, the San Mateo County Community College District decided to close the facility earlier this month.

“I’m not happy with the way it happened,” said Bob Rush, who designed and built the course for the College of San Mateo cross country program in 1971, with the intention that the course be used by the community at large as well. Rush is a member of the course’s board of directors. Rush remains the steward of the course on property owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission that sits above the interchange of Interstate 280 and State Route 92.

The letter from Wolf outlines a number of different issues that led to the district’s decision, the main being its limited use of the course. CSM, which is the only of the three schools in the district to field a cross country team, used the facility once every other year as the site of the Coast Conference championships.

The other big points of contention were liability issues that the district was simply no longer willing to risk and concerns from local homeowners, who were upset with the amount of events being run on the course.

When contacted about the closure, Wolf said a statement from the district would be forthcoming.

The Crystal Springs Course is used extensively by high school and middle school teams, as well as for fundraisers. The course is also used by the public at large. The Peninsula Athletic League is but one of the many leagues that use the course for league contests and was formerly the home for the Central Coast Section championships. The section has since added Toro Park in Salinas to the championship rotation, with Crystal Springs being used every other year as the host site.

“Probably every school from San Francisco to Monterey Bay (uses Crystal Springs in some capacity or another). They have invitationals up there, they have practice meets,” Rush said.

Rush said during the championship season, which occurs in late October and runs through mid-November, there are races being run for 30 days straight.

“We’ve had over a half million kids compete competitively on that course (over the years),” Rush said.

Rush is mostly upset with the fact he was not consulted about the decision. The first he had heard of the decision came April 6, when he received the letter from Wolf. Rush was hired as CSM cross country coach in 1969 and designed and helped build the course. After he stepped down as coach, he still helped maintain the facility, having electrical power later added to run the computer and timing equipment necessary to conduct an event.

Rush said he used his contacts inside both the SFPUC and Cal Fire in the early 1970s to get permission to use the land and the equipment to cut in the course. He said it was when he brought in the electrical team to put in power that the SFPUC realized how popular the course was and decided to issue a usage permit to CSM for a one-time fee of \$1,000.

“I was not involved in the conversation (about shutting the facility), even though I designed and maintained the course for the last half century,” Rush said. “I got the email (from Wolf) and did not have a chance to have a meeting or anything.”

Rush’s hope now is that another organization — a school, a school district, CCS or a deep-pocket private donor — is willing to take over the financial responsibilities to reopen the course.

“What we’re trying to do is get an institution to take over the responsibility of the permit,” Rush said. “I’ve asked one of the local schools (about doing so) and they’ll talk about it. I’m hoping it will be a transfer of the permit.”

There are other local cross country facilities, including courses on or near Westmoor and Half Moon Bay high schools, but not many the caliber of Crystal Springs, which has a wide fan base.

“It’s a major blow for all the schools,” said Frank Hunt, a longtime runner who uses the facility for the last 40 years himself, is the current Aragon head cross country coach and who has coached on the Peninsula for 21 years.

“It’s one of the best ranked. It’s known nationwide. The bottom line is, it’s a facility that’s just going to disappear.”

Added Rush: “It’s probably one of the few, true cross country courses. It’s not cross park course, or cross golf course, or cross anything else. ... It’s a gem we’re lucky to have.”

