



VERN FISHER / PENINSULA TIMES TRIBUNE

There are plenty of hazards to keep cross country runners occupied at the Crystal Springs course in Belmont, but everyone agrees the layout has character.

You won't run into a tougher course than this

David Kiefer

PENINSULA TIMES TRIBUNE/SPECIAL

If cross country runners formed a fraternity, running the Crystal Springs course would be considered hazing.

The freshmen — or rather, the uninitiated — hear the stories, perhaps embellished, from the veterans about the rigors of running a

PREP SPOTLIGHT

race on the Belmont trails.

"If you think this is tough, just wait until you run at Crystal Springs," they say.

For most local runners, Crystal Springs is synonymous with cross country. The 2.95-mile high school course is the site of all the

major meets in the Central Coast Section, including the CCS finals. It is the 20th straight year that Crystal Springs has been used for high school events.

The 4.195-mile course is a major community college venue and its 6.2-mile course is used annually as the site of the West Coast Conference and Pacific Association/TAC championships.

The national championships were often held there, featuring runners such as Olympic gold medalists Kip Keino and Frank Shorter. And during the 1980s, an unknown Chabot College runner, Doug Padilla, developed into one of the country's finest.

The course may be the on-

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RUNNING/ Two generations know the grueling appeal of the famous Crystal Springs cross country course

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ly one of its kind on the West Coast — that is, a series of trails planned and developed solely for the purpose of cross-country competition.

"In my opinion, it's the best cross country course there is," said College of San Mateo coach Bob Rush, the groundskeeper and creative force behind the course.

"We're starting to see a second generation of kids whose fathers ran there. My goal, and I hope to see it in my lifetime, is for kids to

be able to compare their times to their grandfathers'."

Generations of runners can describe the treacherous beginning — a near-free fall down a hill. The trail loops back and the runners reach the first mile going back up toward the starting line.

The second mile features varied terrain, on a curving trail through the chaparral with a slight downhill. The rest of the course, though, tests the mettle of each athlete.

A steep hill is followed by a series of switchbacks and finishes with a seemingly endless stretch

that leaves nervous runners wondering if they have enough left to try to outkick the opponent on their heels.

Maybe it was exhaustion that caused one delirious Gunn High runner to walk off the course at the conclusion of a meet and into the wrong bus, which transported him to Fremont High.

Before Interstate 280 was built, an old course existed, crossing the area of present freeway, that was more dangerous than the present version.

"It had a really steep hill," said 28th-year Aragon coach Bill Das-

karolis. "In inclement weather, it was sort of an entertainment center. People would gather and watch who would fall next."

Sometimes, it's man-against-beast. One runner was dive-bombed by a red-tailed hawk, another knocked down by a deer. Occasionally, runners step in gopher holes and are stung by mud hornets.

"At one of our Center meets, I noticed some kids throwing rocks into the grass near the finish line," Woodside coach Jim Luttrell said. "I looked and there was a rattlesnake. It bolted and went

straight toward the finish line where all the timers were.

"(Carlmont coach) Loren Lansberry says, in a subtle tone, 'By the way, there's a rattler headed your way.' Everyone looked up. Some of the kids were about to finish, but it veered into the bushes. As far as I know, it's still there."

Said Rush: "Some coaches complain about the terrain, but I tell them, 'If you want to run on a golf course, run on a golf course. If you want to run on a parking lot, run on a parking lot. But if you want to run cross country, this is cross country.'"