

Lindstrom, Cortes excited about NAIA races

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 14 November 2018 04:36 -



James Lindstrom and Vanessa Cortes could have run all the way to Cedar Rapids from their homes in California with all the miles they've registered with the Mount Mercy cross country teams during their careers.

Now Lindstrom and Cortes will be running the most significant miles of their lives - actually, kilometers - when they compete in the 63rd annual NAIA national cross country meets at Seminole Valley Park in Cedar Rapids on Friday.

The women's 5K race is scheduled for 10:30 a.m., with the men's 8K race to follow at 11:30.

Lindstrom, a senior from Apple Valley, Calif., finished third at the Heart of America Conference meet two weeks ago and is aiming for All-American honors at the NAIA meet. Cortes, a junior from Bakersfield, Calif., placed fourth at the conference meet and is hoping for a solid performance as well.

There will be 36 full teams in each race, along with 93 at-large individuals in the women's contest and 83 at-large runners in the men's competition. That makes for approximately 700 runners all told.

Mount Mercy received automatic berths in both races as the host school, but the Mustangs have an accomplished cross country program and should feel right at home in the elite fields.



"I'm excited. Definitely nervous," said Lindstrom. "Super-excited. I can't wait to race."

Lindstrom finished 136th at the national meet last year and is looking for significant improvement as a senior. The top-30 finishers will be named All-Americans.

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"I'm definitely going to shoot for All-American," he said. "If I come up short, I'm not going to be super-mad about it."

Lindstrom showed what he can do at the conference meet when he placed a strong third in Kansas City.

"He looked good," said Tad Hulst, the assistant head coach for cross country at Mount Mercy. "You can tell he earned the respect of his competitors. They were all looking at him through the race.

"His mind-set has changed," said Hulst. "He's flicked the switch this year and he's show a maturity that is really fun to watch.

"We were telling him how good he really is and can be. And I think he's starting to believe it and it's showing, the way he attacks races and the way he shows up every day at practice."

Hulst thinks Lindstrom has a legitimate shot at placing in the top-30 and perhaps higher. And he thinks Cortes has a chance to finish in the top-50 or perhaps reach All-American status herself, but Cortes is a little more cautious.

"My goal is to be in the top 100," she said. "The top-100 seems like the right number. We'll see how it goes."

Cortes has made great strides this year as a junior. She ran a marathon for the first time as a sophomore, which gave her a big boost of confidence.

"I think it's the marathon training I did last year," she said. "Ever since then I've been better. It definitely helped. I've always wanted to do a marathon."

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Hulst thinks Cortes has really improved this year.

"She's flicked the switch as well," he said. "She's really starting to realize how good she is. And she's being aggressive. It's fun to see her have that belief in herself."

Lindstrom, Colton Forster, Michael Marshall, Aaron Golding and Cameron Steffens were the top finishers for the Mount Mercy men at the conference meet. Cortes, Alexa Zamora, Andrea Ertz, McKenna Johnson and Emily Erickson led the Mount Mercy women at the league meet.

There will be 36 elite NAIA cross country teams in both races on Friday, but the Mustangs are looking to make a mark on their home course in both events.

"Top-25 is very realistic for us," said Jamie Jimison, the director of cross country and track at Mount Mercy. "Obviously we'll be very happy if we're top-25. We're going to be ecstatic if we're top-20."

The Mount Mercy men are making their sixth appearance at the national meet. They finished 28th last year, the best showing in school history.

The Mount mercy women are making their fifth appearance in the event. They placed 24th in 2001 for their best showing.

The University of British Columbia won the men's and women's races last year, but British Columbia is competing in the Canadian national meet this year and not racing here.

Southern Oregon, St. Francis (Ill.), College of Idaho, and The Master's (Calif.) are the highest-ranked men's teams in the field. Northwest Christian (Ore.), Biola (Calif.), Aquinas (Mich.) and Oklahoma City are the highest-ranked women's teams in the championships.