

Girls Cross Country Overview

Head Coach Ryan Paola leads the 2025 Joel Barlow girls' cross-country team. Coach Paola is in his 10th year of coaching girls' cross-country and is also a familiar face around the school due to his teaching responsibilities. This fall, Mr. Paola is teaching Principles of Engineering, Video Production, and 3D Printing and Design. Coach Paola says there is "a lot of carryover" regarding teaching and coaching. "Coaching, especially as a teacher, is something that helps you connect with the students in a different way. You can't have that relationship with a student just in class. When you build it up as a coach and a teacher, you get a different perspective, and the impact that you have on them is dramatic." The term resilient was used by Coach Paola, saying that "Sports, regardless of what they are, is so helpful, helping teach kids how to push through things."

Patience and growth are two things that Coach Paola continues to learn about himself in coaching. He said that it is important to reflect upon mistakes, but not to be overly critical. "Sometimes you get into a small little lens where you see it from one little perspective and think everything is wrong, then as you step back ... I'm actually doing ok." The keys that Coach Paola thinks about are "Figuring out what works, what doesn't work, what I need to do to become a better coach, and every year it changes, and if it doesn't change, it's time to move on."

The top three athletes, according to Coach Paola, to watch this year are Olivia Katula, Stephanie Bardani, and Clara Mehnor. Katula projects to be the number one. Some other athletes Coach Paola mentioned are Pheobe Smith and Vivian D'Amico. Olivia Katula and Stephanie Bardani are the only seniors on the team. This year's squad has a disparity between upper and underclassmen. Seven of the 15 girls on the team are freshmen. A positive note is that "The freshmen have definitely grown and improved a lot since the beginning of the month," said Coach Paola. Although the team graduated five players last year, only one of them was in the top five. The difference between this year and last year is that this team has "more depth," said Coach Paola.

Coach Paola explained that depth is relative; it's "Less about numbers and more about quality." He said that you need "Three solid people to be competitive. If you don't have three solid people who are in the front of every race, your depth is only going to get you so far." Based on the scoring system, Coach says that your top three runners need to be among the top five to seven in the race to be competitive. As Paola put it, "Having one number one, while it's nice, it doesn't carry the team. Having two is really good, but three can pretty much guarantee you you're going to be in the top of the league."

Practice begins with a warm-up. Once the girls are warm, they perform their workout, post-workout stuff, and stretch to conclude practice. “Brevity is important to us,” said Coach Paola. The characteristic that Coach seeks the most in his athletes is honesty. “It’s not like one field with track where you can watch everybody, so you’re only as good as your honesty. When you don’t see somebody, you have to trust that they are doing the work, and if they’re not, you find out in competition if you can’t do it in practice.” Some tips and strategies that Paola recommends to his athletes are to eat all three meals, hydrate, stretch, and lastly, “consistency is key.”

The girls finished 7th in the league. Olivia Katula and Clara Mehnor are expected to run at the CIAC Divisional Championship on Oct. 25. The top 12 runners will qualify for the CIAC State Open.