

## HUNTERDON/WARREN/SUSSEX ~ BOYS CROSS-COUNTRY, FALL, 2011

Phillipsburg's Harper, No. 8 Pope John boys triumph at Hunterdon/Warren/Sussex meet

Rich Bevensee, October 12, 2011 11:28 p.m.

As recently as two days ago, Jon Harper was dealing with a painful injury which may have knocked a lesser runner out of the lineup.

Harper, a senior at Phillipsburg, sustained a groin pull on his right side during a Monday training run and momentarily considered skipping a championship meet, one in which he was favored to win.

But then team pride got the best of him. Harper, who has already cultivated a reputation as a gutsy runner who can dig as deep as anyone down the stretch in a tight race, dug a little deeper yesterday at the Hunterdon/Warren/Sussex Championships. With the injury still nagging him, Harper built a 100-yard lead before he hit the two-mile mark and cruised to his first H/W/S title in 15:16.3 at the Sussex County Fairgrounds 3.0-mile course in Augusta.

"Monday was a struggle," Harper said. "On a scale of 1-10, the pain was about an 8. But I wasn't too concerned because I'm not going to let my teammates down."

Harper didn't. "It wasn't about time today," he said. "Championships are all about place. This one means a lot. One of my goals coming into this season was to win as many titles as I can before I graduate."

Wallkill Valley junior James Corti finished second in 15:27.0, and Voorhees senior Harrison Brakewood, seeking his third major title this fall, placed third in 15:28.7.

In a much-anticipated team battle, Pope John, No. 8 in The Star-Ledger Top 20, pushed four runners into the top 14 and received a big finish from its fifth runner to edge two highly ranked teams and claim its first H-W-S title. Pope John scored 64 points while its Sussex County rival, No. 10 Wallkill Valley, had 74 points, and defending champion and No. 12 North Hunterdon finished third overall with 81 points.

Leading the charge for Pope John was sophomore Scott Meehan, who finished eighth in 15:51.5.

"When we got here we knew we had to win. There were no excuses," said Pope John senior Joe Galica, the team's No. 3 runner who placed 12th overall. "We didn't win the (North Jersey Athletic Conference) and we felt we should have, so we came here to get back on track and show how talented we are."

This is Pope John's first championship against area competition since winning a ninth straight Sussex County Interscholastic League title in 2008. Sussex County teams were included into the Hunterdon-Warren-Sussex meet in 2009, and Wallkill Valley won the first H-W-S title.

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For Pope John, Meehan was followed by junior Chris Hatler (ninth), Galica, senior Nick Bertoline (14th) and junior Peter Spinks (21st).

Wallkill Valley led Pope John, 23-29, after three runners crossed for each team, and the score was tied at 43-all after four runners finished. It was Spinks' effort which was key as he finished 10 places ahead of Wallkill Valley's fifth man.

"I think we can get a lot faster," Pope John coach Brian Corcoran said. "I wanted them to run a controlled but fast first mile, and I think we need to work on that. Their second mile was good, and our third mile wasn't bad but could be a little better. We have some improvement to make but I think for right now it was a good race."

Harper also holds himself to a higher standard -- to North Hunterdon's Matt McDonald, a cross-country and track All-Stater who graduated last spring. Harper finished second to McDonald in the H-W-S meet last fall.

Harper now has three individual titles to his credit this season. He won the Varsity A race in 15:56.6 at the season-opening Randolph Invitational at Freedom Park in Randolph. He also claimed the Stewart Memorial Varsity A race in 16:34.2 at Warinanco Park's 3.25-mile championship course in Elizabeth.

Harper will be back in action at the Skyland Conference Championships Oct. 27 at Natirar Park in Peapack. He finished fifth there last season.

"I look at his times and I think I'm progressing at the same pace he did," Harper said of McDonald. "When I'm matching him time for time is when I started to gain some confidence, but sometimes confidence doesn't always match confidence. When I started winning races, I knew I was doing good things."

### BOYS

TEAMS: 1-Pope John 64. 2-Wallkill Valley 74. 3-North Hunterdon 81. 4-Delaware Valley 128. 5-Hunterdon Central 145. 6-Voorhees 160. 7-Phillipsburg 165. 8-Newton 217. 9-Lenape Valley 257. 10-North Warren 310. 11-Hopatcong 326. 12-Kittatinny 329. 13-Sparta 372. 14-South Hunterdon 389. 15-Hackettstown 417. 16-High Point 425. 17-Warren Hills 495. 18-Vernon 531. 19-Sussex Tech 554.

INDIVIDUALS: 1-Jon Harper, Phillipsburg, 15:16.3. 2-James Corti, Wallkill Valley, 15:27.0. 3-Harrison Brakewood, Voorhees, 15:28.7. 4-Dylan Capwell, Hopatcong, 15:34.5. 5-Charles Koontz, Hunterdon Central, 15:39.9. 6-Jaimin Vekaria, North Hunterdon, 15:44.9. 7-David Folsom, North Hunterdon, 15:50.2. 8-Scott Meehan, Pope John, 15:51.5. 9-Chris Hatler, Pope John, 15:52.1. 10-Ryan Chiesa, Wallkill Valley, 15:54.1.