



2011 MEET PREVIEW

With more than 3,300 runners entered the sixth edition of the Forest Park Cross Country Festival promises to be not only the biggest year in the event's history but also the fastest. Cool temperatures could very well pave the way for course records on both sides and with teams from Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri and Wisconsin the battles should be fierce in each and every division all day long.

Headlining the day will be the boys and girls varsity green division races which each feature loads of talented runners from all over the Midwest. On the girls side Arkansas' Valerie Reina leads a trio of newcomers trying to make their mark at the Festival. Reina, the daughter of US Cross Country Champion Reuben Reina, led her Springdale Har-Ber team to a sixth place finish at the Arkansas State Meet in 2010 by winning the individual title in 18:30. Reina, a senior, may see her stiffest competition from two local freshman, Hannah Long from Eureka and Sophia Racette from Nerinx Hall. Long was second at last year's USATF Junior Olympic Cross Country Championships and Racette is coming off a season-opening win at the Fleet Feet XC Kickoff on August 31. The top returner from last year's Festival, Alyssa Jones from Rockwood Summit, is also a top contender to take home the title. All four girls will be looking to break the course record of 18:41 set the very first year of the event by Ladue's Natalie Todd.

The boys course record is a very coveted one as it was set by 4:07 high school miler Josh Thebeau from Potosi. Thebeau, one of the most decorated Missouri distance runners ever, ran 15:28* at the Festival back in 2006. If that mark is going down it is likely to fall at the hands of either defending Festival Champion Caleb Wilfong or defending State Champion Zach Herriott. Last year the two battled the entire way with Rock Bridge's Wilfong just nipping Herriott from Rockhurst in a thrilling duel down a very muddy home stretch. Likely joining the two aforementioned favorites all the way will be Festus' Drew White who showed he has the ability to run with anyone after he took home top honors in the Class 3 3200 last spring and do not count out Marquette sophomore Noah Kauppila, one of the nation's best underclassmen.

The team battles on the boys side should be just as exciting with the defending Festival Champions taking on a Missouri team that looks very tough to beat and a couple of other teams from outside the Show-Me-State that could very well leave with some hardware. Last year's top squad from O'Fallon (IL) put on a dominating display in 2010, winning the meet by a full eighty points. They lose four from the seven that ran here a year ago but do return junior Alex Riba who could be in the mix for the individual title and Nicholai Sarpy who was a solid 22nd. The top team from Missouri and the overall favorites appear to be the boys from Rock Bridge led by the terrific trio of Caleb Wilfong, Jordan Cook and Nathan Keown. All three were in the top 31 in 2010 and even with the deep field we could see all three in the top 20 in 2011. That would probably mean victory for the Bruins. Other teams that could step up and surprise include Sprindale Har-Ber (AR), third at the Arkansas State Meet in 2010, Marquette University HS, second here a year ago, and two-time Festival champions Saint Louis University High School.

On the girl's side Lee's Summit North, the defending champs, have elected to go elsewhere this weekend so we will see a new winner in 2011. Jefferson City was second a year ago but they lost quite a few runners to graduation and it may be tough for the Lady Jays to match the depth of some of the other squads at this year's meet. One of those squads is certainly Eureka, with individual title contender Hannah Long as well as a host of ladies capable of running under twenty minutes on Saturday. Eureka was bested by Nerinx Hall at last week's Fleet Feet Cross Country Kickoff but Nerinx will run without a couple of its top runners on Saturday due to injuries and other conflicts. The girls from Rock Bridge will be at full strength however and might just try and steal the show from their boys team as they also boast a trio of top runners led by freshman Kayla Funkenbusch, senior Samantha Garrett and junior Megan Schulte. Other contenders could include Springdale Har-Ber (AR), Notre Dame (Cape Girardeau), St. Joseph's Academy and Rockwood Summit.