



New Mexico Activities Association Student-Athlete Spotlight

Thomas puts Miyamura on the Map

By Karl Schneider

Niles Thomas put together one of the best cross-country seasons imaginable during his junior year.

The Miyamura runner was unbeaten heading into the 2014 5A state meet. He won each of the eight races he entered and only an individual state title remained to check off his list for a perfect season.

Thomas finished the season with an unblemished record on November 8, 2014 in Rio Rancho, crossing the finish line with a time of 15:33.40, which was 38.15 seconds ahead of the next fastest finisher in 5A.

"It felt good. I felt like all my hard work paid off at the end of the season," Thomas said of the 2014 title.

With the individual title, Thomas became the first male in Miyamura school history to win a cross-country title and the first runner from Gallup since 1998 to take home the honor.

After claiming the 5A individual title, Thomas was awarded the Gatorade Runner of the Year for New Mexico and went on to compete at the Nike Cross Nationals Southwest Regional Championships in Casa Grande, Arizona, where he finished 12th overall.

Following the stellar season Thomas put together in 2014, during which he won his nine meets by an average of 33 seconds, only one question remained - could he repeat perfection during his senior season?

Like 2014, Thomas started the 2015 season at the University of New Mexico Cross Country Invitational. But, unlike his junior campaign when he finished first with a time of 16:03.00, Thomas placed third and ran 33 seconds slower than the previous year.

It wasn't the last time Thomas would finish below the top spot on the podium and, as the season wore on, doubts about Thomas' shot at repeating as state champion began to surface.

Perhaps he peaked during his junior season. Maybe the mental and physical strain he put on himself during 2014 had caught up with him. It's possible the pressure of trying to repeat perfection took its toll. Or, maybe he just had a few bad days on the course.

Whatever the reason, the doubts were there and Thomas looked less and less the invincible runner everyone else was chasing in a race for silver.

But Thomas silenced all his doubters on November 7 in Rio Rancho when he finished the 5K race in 15:54.00 to claim back-to-back individual titles in 5A.

Thomas said the title his senior season came with a better feeling than in 2014.



“It was my senior year and you always want to win something big your senior year,” said the 5-foot-4, 125-pound Thomas. “Plus, I think it was more enjoyable my senior year than my junior year.”

His time was 22 seconds better than teammate Nicholas Jamison, who placed second, and Thomas posted the fastest time at the state meet, regardless of classification.

It’s an impressive feat, especially for someone who wasn’t involved in distance running until he was in the eighth grade.

Born in Phoenix, Thomas moved to Gallup when he was in the fifth grade and made basketball his primary sport.

It wasn’t until the spring of his eighth-grade year that Thomas joined the middle school track team, signing up for the mile and 100-meter races.

The first meet he competed in was just a scrimmage for the middle school, but Thomas was so strong in the mile that the Miyamura track team invited him to join the varsity squad midway through his eighth-grade season.

Prior to the first day of practice with the Patriots, Thomas waited in his mom’s car outside Gallup’s Public School Stadium, wishing to be anywhere else. He was new to running and the prospect of competing with and against kids four years older had him rattled.

“I think I was just nervous at the time because I was so young and didn’t really know what I was doing,” Thomas said.

But the small, unassuming eighth grader quickly proved he belonged.

Thomas qualified for the 2012 state track meet in the 3,200 and 1,600 meter events after placing second and third at the District 6-4A meet. At the state meet in Albuquerque, Thomas was the Patriots’ top runner, making the finals and finishing 14th in the 3,200.

He has become more comfortable and confident in his running since then. This track season Thomas will try to repeat as the 5A 1,600-meter champion after winning the title last season in a time of 4:22.61.

Still, one question remains for Thomas. Where will he go from here?

College programs have been, and continue to contact the star runner, hoping he’ll join their team.

Thomas said he wants to go to college and run for a college program, but the decision on where is still in the works.

Grades in school aren’t holding Thomas back from making a choice — he brings home A’s and B’s on his report cards. What’s keeping him from making a commitment is the plethora of options that sit before him.

“It’s really exciting when you get a letter (from a college),” Thomas said. “I remember when I got my first letter from a college. I was excited about it, but as they kept coming, it became more of a regular thing for me. But I liked it, and still like it and they’re still coming in, too.”