



## Up Close and Personal: John Prather - Saguaro High School Head Cross Country Coach

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### Arizona Track

When Saguaro High School head cross country coach John Prather was contacted for this story, he was humble—but he managed to crack a joke about the ArizonaTrack.com forums.

“There are other coaches with greater successes than I’ve ever had,” Prather said. “But if you want to interview me, then fine. Honestly, this is only because I was the first to 500 posts, isn’t it?”

Not really, coach, but we appreciate your humor.

Prather graduated from Saguaro High School in 1976 and Arizona State University in 1980 where he ran the steeplechase. He has been coaching since he was a sophomore in college.

“I ran at Saguaro, I wasn’t very good, and I ran at ASU where I really wasn’t a whole lot better,” Prather said. “I found the steeplechase, which no one wanted to run. By that time, I was pretty much hooked.”

On the ASU outdoor track and field men’s records, Prather remains at number 9 in the men’s 3,000 meter steeplechase, which was set in 1987. Prather also ran for the Santa Monica Track Club and raced pretty seriously into his forties.

No matter how many times he would stop running, he came back. “I’d retire every once in a while, but that’d last like a week because I’d miss it,” Prather said.

Prather has had coaching successes ranging from six All-Americans at Scottsdale Community College, an adult runner ranked in the top five for three years in a row, and rewriting the girls’ distance records at Saguaro. The teams he has coached have never won a state championship, but wins aren’t how Prather would define his successes as a coach.

“My successes are kids I’ve coached that end up being productive adults,” Prather said. “My favorite e-mail I’ve received was from a kid I coached that said, ‘you probably don’t remember me, but I’m at ASU now and I can make good choices. I’m not abusive, I don’t have an eating disorder, and I think I’ve become a productive adult because of a good experience.’”

Arizona Track also had the opportunity to discuss the Arizona Interscholastic Association’s recent overhauling of the format for individual and team state tournaments with Prather.

“I’m conceptually all in favor of it,” Prather said. “But they’re not doing it for the reason I’d hope they’d do it for; they’re doing it to save money.”

For cross country (192 boys teams, 188 girls teams), the sport will reduce from six meets to four. Each division will have three sectionals, and the top 50 percent and top five individuals not on one of the qualifying teams.

Track and field (220 boys teams, 208 girls teams) was reduced from five state meets to four with automatic and provisional qualifiers (similar to the NCAA Indoor Championship system), varying by division, to select a field of 24 at most.

While Prather is in favor of it, he said he anticipates the change to be a bit messy in the beginning. “I’m a little frustrated by it. There always seems to be every couple of years something crops up, particularly qualifying for state in track sort of system,” Prather said. “My belief is I don’t care how

we get there, just tell me before the season starts.”

As far as the future of cross country and track and field in Arizona goes, Prather is cautiously optimistic - optimistic in terms of the talent in the state, cautious about the financial



Prather in 2008 at the Scottsdale Running Co XC Festival

aspects. Cross country is seen as a throwaway sport by many districts, as experienced recently by the Tolleson School District.

“We’re probably deeper in distance runners since we’ve been in the early eighties,” Prather said. “I’m hoping for some economic recovery nationwide, but should that not happen, I’m sure we haven’t seen the last of the cuts.”

When asked about preparation for the 2010 cross country season, Prather said his team at Saguaro is his favorite group so far in terms of his athletes’ personalities.

“All I can say about our team is we’re going to work as hard as anybody, if that’s not good enough we’ll have done all we can do,” Prather said. “We don’t run for press clippings. If the press says we’re going to suck, we’ll still have to run the meets so we’ll find out either way.”