

Go west young Beavers

MSU freshman Schall, sophomore Velasquez head to West Coast for NAIA nationals

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Michael Linnell/MDN --
Minot State University cross country runners Brandon Velasquez, left, and Courtney Schall pose for a photo at Minot's Optimist Soccer Complex during a practice Tuesday. Velasquez, a sophomore, and Schall, a freshman, will head west to the NAIA National Cross Country meet held in Vancouver, Wash., today.

Minot State University cross country is taking baby steps to get to where it wants to be nationally.

The Beavers sent one runner to the NAIA national meet last season and heads to Vancouver, Wash., for today's NAIA national meet with two runners.

One step at a time.

"It is an upward step I feel," MSU head coach Stu Melby said. "The guys moved up one place at conference and while the girls moved down a place, our conference was much faster and better than last year. Both teams made significant jumps from last year and both are still really young. The attitude is there and we are getting better times. We had one last year and this year we have two. I would like to see bigger steps, but this is a step."

Freshman Breyette Schall and sophomore Brandon Velasquez are the lone qualifiers for the women's and men's team respectively, but both figure to earn valuable experience early in their careers at this year's meet.

"It is exciting to see how well I can do and what I have been able to accomplish so far in my career," Schall said. "I want to do well at this year's meet, but it will be a different experience with 280 girls. I don't know what to expect out there, but I am pretty excited."

"This is a big step for me, a nice step and it should be a nice moment to experience," Velasquez said. "I am a little more focused (this year compared to last season). I am seeing the final point and then making a plan to get there. Now I know I can get there."

The duo will be treading on unfamiliar turf as they head to Vancouver as the NAIA meet ventures to the West Coast for the first time. The wet and humid weather in Washington could be a little daunting for the Beavers, especially because of their youth. According to Melby, both runners should be able to adapt.

"We have run in some wet weather before, at South Dakota Mines earlier in the year and they both did well," he said. "But it has been real wet there all week, so it's going to be slippery. Brandon has run on the West Coast all of his life growing up in the San Diego area and he has family in Seattle and has been out there before."

Velasquez is running at his first national meet, but he went with Melby and Cassie Saylor last season in Wisconsin to get a better idea of what to expect at the meet. Both he and Melby believe that paid off.

"I don't think I will do much different at this meet than any other. I went last year to see the meet and I know it went out fast. That's what I want to do," Velasquez said. "The race really goes as everyone gets out fast and the ones towards the front (in the end) will continue that. The others will realize they just went out too fast. I want to be at the lead of that second group, get a nice pace going and then begin to pick it up at the end."

"Brandon went out with us last year and ran the course (during practice times), knowing he wouldn't run last year, but to get an idea of how things go," Melby said. "He talked about wanting to get to that meet because of that. It was a real good experience for him because it made him want to work that much harder."

Melby figures the start of the race will be the key for Velasquez.

"If you don't get out early and the course isn't too open, it is hard to make it up at the end," he said. "I just want him to run a good race. He needs to take the next couple of days (Friday and today) to experience everything that goes around the meet. If he keeps doing what he has been doing, if he is mentally relaxed and doesn't get overwhelmed, he will do just fine. He has the ability to be in the top 100 and if he runs well he could be even higher, top 50 or higher."

Schall hasn't been at a meet like the NAIA national as she has only been running for the better part of two years. That inexperience has dampened her spirits.

"I would love to be in the top 30, but I just don't know," she said. "All of this hasn't hit me fully yet. Once I get down there, I'm sure it will. I have been practicing with Brandon for two weeks and he has done a good job of motivating me and the rest of the team has helped me and pushed me to do well."

Schall will be without teammates for the first time in a meet and will be without twin sister Courtney at the starting line for the first time.

"Breyette is a different scenario (than Velasquez)," Melby said. "She has been barely running for two years and has the potential for the freshman jitters. It will be the first time she doesn't have teammates in the starting box so that will be different for her. But she is so competitive and that will carry over. I am anxious and excited to see what she can do. She might surprise even herself."

"Not having (Courtney) will be tough, especially at the starting line. She is there to calm me down and I won't have that," Schall said. "I will try to find a person in the field who has a time like mine and try to stick with her."