

Home away from home

Minot State boasts five runners from same California high school

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When Minot State University head coach Stu Melby started recruiting now sophomore Brandon Velasquez, he probably didn't realize half of his current team was being courted as well.



Minot State University runners (clockwise from top) Brandon Velasquez, Ryan Perry, Brett Szafarski, Leon Medina and Cory Meza pose for a photo in front of the MSU Dome on Thursday. The five all ran at the same high school in Chula Vista, California, and are making an immediate impact on the MSU men's cross country team as the Beaver begin the season today in Rapid City, SD.

Velasquez's dad, Ken, and Melby were college roommates and had kept in touch over the years. After Melby started to actively recruit the Chula Vista, Calif. standout, he found plenty of talent to go along.

"I went to look at Brandon and got to know his coach, Ian Cumming, and found they have a real good program," said Melby of the Otay Ranch High School team. "There are so many high schools and so many good runners in California alone because of the population density. I met Brandon, and found out Cory (sophomore Cory Meza) likes (MSU) and all of a sudden we had Leon (redshirt freshman Leon Medina) over the summer. They looked at our price and even before we changed to the flat rate for everybody, we are reasonable. You know, we are certainly still looking for more kids in the Great Plains region, but this has

become a great pipeline.”

Meza was the first to sign, then Velasquez, then Medina, who had to red shirt last year because he registered late. This season, mainly due to the first trio, freshman Ryan Perry and Brett Szafarski made the roughly 1,765 mile trip to Minot.

“One by one, we talked it over with each other,” Velasquez said. “Everybody had different situations, but when one decided to go (Meza) I decided to go, then Leon. It really makes team chemistry a lot easier. What took four years to develop at high school and come together in about four hours here.”

“Brandon wanted to build a team up here and was thinking of coming here, but didn’t want to come alone,” Meza said. “So me and Leon decided to come too. From there, we started to network and branch out. I think that all five of us feel we are a part of this turnaround here.”

It was just three seasons ago that the Beavers couldn’t field a full roster on the men’s side. Now, with 11 runners, the atmosphere is different.

“It is a very big step,” Melby said of the numbers. “We have some guys who are quality runners and have that quality of character that we are striving for. Both the men and the women are doing that. We have (athletes) with character, personality and have a cohesiveness.”

The Otay Ranch pipeline’s newest runners Perry and Szafarski are both excited — albeit a little nervous — to get going, especially figuring out how to run in the cold.

“They have warned me about the cold,” said Szafarski, who is going to redshirt this year. “But I think I am looking forward to it. I never thought about running in North Dakota, but my coach got my number and a day later Stu called. I like everything so far.”
“I didn’t know much about Minot, I had seen a couple of pictures, but it was all word of mouth from the guys last year,” Perry said. “I am looking forward to running, even in the cold. Maybe not this cold, but it will be fun, a new experience. There is definitely a team atmosphere here. I hope I can be a part of that. I always hope for the best, never anything less than winning.”

Melby figures Velasquez, who was a top 20 runner in the Dakota Athletic Conference last year, Meza (23rd at the DAC championships), Medina and Perry — along with former Minot High standout Dylan Hildenbrand, should form a strong top five. That group will be joined by a group of runners vying for position.

“Leon is a big key for us, he looks like he has done the work over the summer,” Melby said. “He should made a huge difference. Another one is Dylan. We are looking for big things from him.”

“It was tough sitting out last year,” Medina said. “I didn’t want to redshirt last year, but it helped me in the long run. It made me hungry for this year.

“Last year was tough, but it was a little easier because I knew the guys (from Chula Vista). That made a big difference.”

While there is a resurgence in numbers and team atmosphere with the men, the MSU women’s team feels it is heading on the same path. According to senior Amanda Towle, part

of that is attributed to former runner and national champion Genevieve Binsfeld.

"I think this year is going to be exciting," Towle, from Clancy, Mont., said. "I am the only one left from the Genevieve era and I'm trying to teach some of what she taught. Genny was a lot better than all of us, but she never made it feel like that in practice. She always pushed us, even if she was hurt or tired. I have tried to instill that in the team that this is a team, schedule classes around this, schedule work around this."

Towle and Melby are excited about a solid freshman class that includes former Bishop Ryan standouts Breyette and Courtney Schall, Liz Beck of Larimore, Kara Johnsrud of Watford City and Mirelys Pizarro and Taylor Tuomey of Springhill, Fla.

"The whole freshman group is exciting," Melby said. "Courtney and Breyette only came out for cross country last year and shocked some people and I think they are going to surprise some people at college. Mirelys has come a long way made really big strides and Kara has been a sprinter who is just now coming into her own."

For Towle, the solid freshman group, along with standout sophomore Cassandra Saylor of West Fargo, who earned a spot in last year's national meet, has made for much more competition in practice.

"Practice is already different competition wise and we haven't even been on the course yet," she said. "Last year was the first time in a while with Cassandra that we were battling in practice and on the course. I think there are two freshman runners who are faster than her. We have a really strong five and then four more that are pushing for that sixth spot." While Towle, the lone women's senior, will be looked to for guidance, Melby pointed out another lone senior, the men's Devin Hiller (Minot), as a help guide for the entire program.

"I go back to three years ago when Devin transferred here," he said. "I see the changes ever sense he has been around. He's not really a cross country guy, but has gone out that last two years and he is the kind of guy, the mold, that we are looking for here. He is what we have wanted to build around.

While the two teams were picked fourth (women) and fifth (men) in the conference's preseason poll, Melby thinks his teams are better than that.

"It is tough to gauge in the preseason, but I know we are much better than last year on both sides," he said.

MSU begins its season today at South Dakota Mines Hardrocker Invite.