

By Ed Flink  
STAFF WRITER

CORNWALL -- After attending The Running Academy last summer, Mike Levene developed into a cross country champion, an All-Stater and one of the top performers in New England.

A rising junior at Joel Barlow High, he credits the camp for his breakout season. Peaking at the perfect time, Levene was the runner-up at the South-West Conference meet and in the Class M race at the state meet before placing 10th at the State Open and 14th in New England.

The previous year, he couldn't crack the top 10 in the SWC.

"A lot of what I do is based from this camp. This camp really gives me the boost and teaches me what I need to be taught in order to do the things that I do," Levene said Wednesday evening outside the dining hall at YMCA Camp Mohawk. "They teach you how you can become better and what you're doing wrong. I just try to soak everything in."

Seeking more knowledge and determined to get even better, Levene returned to the camp this year. The one-week session, which began last Sunday and concluded Saturday, attracted a camp-record 94 runners (74 boys, 20 girls) from 22 high schools.

In its fourth year, The Running Academy is operated by Danbury High coach Rob Murray, Weston coach Marty Ogden, Xavier-Middletown coach Seth Spector and Dr. Brian Fullem, a sports medicine Podiatrist from Newtown.

"We all kind of take advantage of our strengths," Murray said, referring to the four equally invested co-directors.

Said Ogden: "We've always wanted to teach what we know and this is a chance to give back to kids from all different teams and teach what we know. I don't bleed school colors. I love the sport and I love kids."

Ogden and a friend who isn't involved came up with the idea. Ogden and Murray had worked at the Five Star running camp near Port Jervis, N.Y. for a decade, initially as



counselors when they were in their early 20s. During a stint as co-coaches at Danbury High, they took the Hatters to the same camp and were members of the staff, allowing them to become more familiar with its business operation.

"Our responsibilities at that camp had grown from being a college counselor, just running with our groups, to a coaching staff member so we actually started doing some administrative work," Murray said. "We knew the nuts and bolts of what needed to be done to get this thing off the ground."

They wanted to hold the camp in Connecticut and after considering several sites they chose YMCA Camp Mohawk, a woodsy backdrop about 40 miles north of Danbury, complete with rust-colored cabins, dirt roads and old-fashioned running trails.

"We wanted to be a little bit more hard core. That's what cross country is about; it's about getting muddy, getting dirty, being part of the environment."

Fran Marchand, the director of YMCA Camp Mohawk, oversees a staff that provides accommodations, support services and meals for visiting campers. The non-profit organization hosts an all-girls YMCA during most of the summer. The East Hampton soccer team, a Cheshire Academy student retreat and The Gunnery's sophomore class are on the upcoming schedule. Marchand said The Running Academy is "very compatible with our mission" and has been impressed with its growth and its campers.

"These guys approached us with a good business plan," he said. "For the first couple of years we gave them a nice low rate which allowed them to function. Now in their fourth year they're self-sustaining.

"I'm really comfortable with these guys being here. We're very careful. They've got a pretty good read on these kids and the kids are pretty respectful."

- Prior to the opening the Running Academy, Connecticut athletes seeking a summer camp usually went to Green Mountain Running Camp in Lyndonville, Vt., which has been around for 33 years. It holds three weekly sessions, charging \$625, and had 850 campers last summer. Former Danbury High standouts George and Dan O'Loughlin attended The Running School in White Lake, N.Y., which is in its 36th year. It had more than 400 campers last year and holds "one action packed session" according to a print ad.

The boys and girls programs at Ridgefield, Newtown and New Milford have combined to produce numerous conference and state championship teams and individuals over the past decade. Those teams traditionally prepare at the Green Mountain camp.

Murray understands that coaches and runners like to return to places which they're familiar, especially if they've reaped success from previous visits.

"You know the staff, you know the lay of the land, maybe you want to become a counselor (when you get older). "We have to try to market ourselves to the schools that don't go to camp yet," Murray said.

Schools like Farmington. Its runners never went to camp but eight team members are here this week.

Even without runners from Ridgefield, Newtown and New Milford, The Running Academy has grown from about 40 kids to the mid 50s to the mid 70s to this year's 94. It could handle about 140, according to Murray, but the directors prefer a manageable number so the camp can remain more personal and personable than the bigger camps.

For training runs, the campers are put in groups of 10 based on ability. But a typical day also includes volunteer classroom sessions that focus on subjects including visualization, aerobic training, diet, injuries and leadership, as well as activities like swimming, volleyball and ultimate Frisbee.

"It's not as much about physically working the kids during the week; it's not just about running. It's more about educating the kids about the sport of distance running and cross country. That's why we call it The Running Academy," Murray said.

"And just being around other runners gives themselves a sense of self esteem, confidence and belief in our sport. When you're surrounding yourself with other athletes that have the same passion and devotion to their sport, you feel there is a sense of belonging.

"Camp is more than just running. It's about the speakers, the mini-talks, and then in the evening we have social activities for the kids. Sometimes runners tend to be a little more introverted and they grow as people just as much as they do as runners."

This becomes evident during an end-of-camp skit, which allows the kids to have some fun by dressing up and mocking the staff.

Another highlight is the guest speaker. On Wednesday night, it was U.S. Olympian Tim Broe, a 5,000-meter specialist who finished 11th at the 2004 Games. He began his presentation in the recreation hall by showing a video of the final laps of his victory at the Olympic Trials in Sacramento. Earlier, he noted how much he enjoys attending these types of camps and sharing his story.

"I'm a big kid. I tell the kids when I was their age I was really shy. I went to one camp and didn't talk to a single person. I think it's making up for lost time. I'm out playing kick ball and doing all the things they're doing," Broe said.

Broe, of East Peoria, Ill., is now coaching his former high school team after what he described as an underachieving scholastic career during which he spent more time hunting and fishing than training but still was good enough to earn a scholarship to the University of Alabama.

He didn't get totally dedicated and begin to reach his potential until after he missed making the 2000 Olympic team. That's when he began to regret his previous approach.

"I think that's the big message that the kids can relate to," Broe said. "That really hits home."

As Ogden noted, there's no shortcuts to becoming a great runner.

"You've got to eat right. You've got to do stretching. You can't just do one magic workout and say, 'I'm there.' Most people want instant gratification," Ogden noted.

- For serious cross country runners, summer camp signals the start of the preseason.

"It's always a blast and you always look forward to it at the end of the summer," said Danbury's Will Ahearn, a rising senior who was fifth at last year's State Open. "It's the thing that tops off the summer and leads you back into school because you have to get up early and it gets you set up for the school lifestyle." Sherman resident Moira Kenny, a rising junior at Immaculate High, attended The Running Camp last summer as a cross country neophyte and a relative unknown. She wound up placing sixth in New England and 10th in the State Open.

The experience she gained at camp was clearly a factor in her success.

"I really liked it. I met a lot of friends and I had fun running. I learned a lot from the talks and all the information they taught you really helped," said Kenny, whose group won the lip-syncing contest last week.

Her Immaculate teammate, Katie Collins of Brookfield, is a rising sophomore and a first-time camper. Like Kenny, she's a field hockey convert who also runs track.

"It's very fun," she said, noting how she's become friends with the Ellington High girls. "There's a lot of team bonding, just meeting new people. It's very social. And it's not just running."

"It's great," Levene added. "I'll sit with my team at all of the meals but during the day I'll hang out with the Danbury guys. I have some friends from Ellington, Immaculate. So I get around and talk to everyone during the day. That's one of the big thrills coming here, getting to know a lot more people."

Among the benefits is being videotaped for form analysis.

"When do you ever get to see yourself run? My arm goes out a little but it's fine. It really helps, though. It shows what injuries you get and why you get them by the way you run," said Levene, who also captured invitational races at Bethel and Wilton last year.

The directors aren't going to get rich and retire from the camp, which charges between \$500 and \$550. They have other goals.

"We didn't do it for the money. We did it to hopefully help the sport grow and the

individual athletes grow," Murray said.

Added Ogden: "We could make more money but it's more of a labor of love, just like coaching is."