

Running camp turns rivals into friends

By Ed Flink
STAFF WRITER

CORNWALL -- When Ridgefield's Bryan Kovalsky began his running career in the early 1990s, he practically hated his rivals at Danbury High.

But he also respected them.

"I got along with their coaches and at first I didn't get along with their team. I think I used them to motivate me," the 28-year-old Kovalsky recalled this week at The Running Academy, where he served as a coach. "But then after a while..."

After a while he wound up developing close friendships with some of the Hatters, including fellow camp counselor Ramon Laboy, who was in Kovalsky's wedding party.

Imagine that!

It's typical within the cross country community, however. Runners are a unique breed. They relate to a desire to train, to push themselves, yet they're usually not necessarily trying to beat each other to the finish line.

Kovalsky's presence at the camp isn't surprising and it goes beyond the relationship he's built with Danbury coach Rob Murray, one of the camp directors. Kovalsky's sister, Ann, is married to J.R. Meloro, a former Notre Dame University runner who came up with the idea for The Running Academy along with Marty Ogden at Murray's bachelor party.

Small world.

Being at the camp provided flashbacks for Kovalsky, who graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and now teaches English at Ridgefield High.

"It's great to see Danbury (doing so well). I know some of their brothers and I just talked to them (Tuesday and Wednesday). It's almost like I've known them for 10 years. It's funny because they have the same voices and they act the same way (as their brothers). It's like a family. The thing you get from coming to this camp is it's like a 100-person family. It's really neat."

The campers support each other and gain new friends who they'll contact during the season and mingle with at meets.

"It's teamwork. Instead of being jealous, they really work together and have a lot of fun," Kovalsky said. "If you stuck around you'd see a lot of boys dressed up like girls and visa versa. It's funny. Everybody lets loose and has a good time."