

## HIGH SCHOOL BOYS SOCCER

## In strange year, goal remains the same for Northfield boys soccer

By MICHAEL HUGHES  
michael.hughes@apgsomn.com

The signs are everywhere. The reminders to wear masks and distance from teammates and friends, the lack of non-conference games and the uncertain fate of the postseason are all byproducts of a boys soccer season that will look and feel different as a result of COVID-19.

The only constants remaining in 2020 are what happens on the field and Northfield's goal of claiming the program's first Big 9 Conference title, which will likely involve toppling rival Austin.

"We haven't beat Austin in like four years or something, so I'm pretty excited," senior forward/midfielder Grant Roney said.

Last year, the Raiders entered the final day of the regular season with a chance at the conference title. After doing their part by topping Faribault 2-1, however, Austin still secured its third straight crown by edging Rochester Century 2-1 to maintain its three-point advantage atop the standings.

Two days before, the Raiders and Packers played to a hotly-contested 1-1 draw.

"Last year was pretty close, too," senior goalie Jair Ascensio-Puga said. "I think it was a 1-1 tie and both teams did an amazing job. I think we can come out even harder, put in the work and take the title."

With a conference-only schedule



Northfield senior Grant Roney prepares to pass the ball during Wednesday morning's practice at Spring Creek Park in Northfield. Roney is entering his second season as a captain for the Raiders, and will be joined this year by goalkeeper Jair Ascensio-Puga. (Michael Hughes/Northfield News)

for this season, a Big 9 title is the most attainable goal for every team. And, in a convenient twist, Northfield and Austin are scheduled to battle on the final day of the regular season at 7 p.m. Oct. 6 at Northfield High School.

Leading the Raiders into that game will be Roney and Ascensio-Puga —

the team's two captains for this season.

Last year, Roney led Northfield from the front and was rewarded with a spot on the all-conference team for the second season in a row. In those two years, Roney has totaled 24 goals and 10 assists, and last year, he helped pace an offensive attack that racked up 41 goals in 13 games.

Ascensio-Puga, meanwhile, entered last season as part of a time-share in net but claimed the full-time role about five games into the season. He was part of a defensive wall that allowed two goals or more only twice all season.

They're both dictating a message that without a set postseason, each

## BOYS SOCCER SCHEDULE

Sept. 1 — at Rochester Mayo, 7 p.m.  
Sept. 3 — vs. Albert Lea, 7 p.m.  
Sept. 10 — at Rochester John Marshall, 7 p.m.  
Sept. 12 — vs. Mankato East, 2 p.m.  
Sept. 15 — vs. Rochester Century, 7 p.m.  
Sept. 18 — at Faribault, 7 p.m.  
Sept. 22 — vs. Red Wing, 7 p.m.  
Sept. 24 — vs. Owatonna, 7 p.m.  
Sept. 29 — at Mankato West, 7 p.m.  
Oct. 2 — at Winona, 7 p.m.  
Oct. 6 — vs. Austin, 7 p.m.

regular-season game carries an outsized importance compared to past years for a team with 12 seniors returning from last year's varsity roster.

"Every game is going to be the state final for us," Roney said.

"We're just going to treat every game like it's our final game that we're going to play together," Ascensio-Puga added. "We're just going to give it our all and have fun while we're doing it."

Reach Sports Editor Michael Hughes at 645-1106 or follow him on Twitter @NFNewsSports. © Copyright 2020 APG Media of Southern Minnesota. All rights reserved.

## HIGH SCHOOL SWIMMING AND DIVING

## Through a pandemic, Northfield girls swimming and diving captains finding ways to lead

By MICHAEL HUGHES  
michael.hughes@apgsomn.com

This year's captains for the Northfield girls swimming and diving team were already going to have a lot on their hands.

Replacing last year's captains, and a 16-athlete senior class, was daunting enough for seniors Alanah Barnes, Ellen Varley, Zibby Hanifl and Kaylee Malecha.

Adding in the COVID-19 safety precautions that require the Gators to break up into two separate practice groups each day has made the buildup to Thursday's season-opening meet against Rochester Century feature seemingly endless choppy water to navigate through.

"It's strange, because my fellow captains and I, we haven't been in this role before," Hanifl said. "We're in a position where we're learning how to be captains, and then on top of that we're learning how to be captains during a pandemic, so it's nothing like the other captains before us. We're having to reinvent ways to have team bonding and staying connected with the team."

For starters, that means all four captains are rarely ever in the same place. Because of the multiple practice groups, the foursome have divided and conquered to make sure there's at least one captain in the building at every team event.

Thursday's meet will be the second time the entire team is going to be in the same building at the same time since practice started last Monday. Wednesday's practice will be the first time.

"Meet days will probably be our only days where we get to truly be together," Malecha said. "We're just going to try and keep it the same, cheer each other on and keep that positive attitude."

Meets present another challenge, since all competitions this

season will be done virtually, with each team swimming in its home pool and then scoring the meet against that night's opponent later on.

Thursday, in fact, Northfield is starting its meet at 6 p.m., but its opponent, Rochester Century, will likely not start until after 8 p.m. since it shares a facility with Rochester John Marshall, which is also competing Thursday night.

"It'll be strange not having the competitors next to you," Varley said. "It'll just be your teammates, which is also fun, but it'll definitely be interesting to see how it goes. The relays will be strange, because we can't all be next to each other besides the blocks, but it'll be an experience."

"The mindset will just be a lot different," Barnes added. "If you see your teammate, it just feels like practice and, 'Oh, we're just having fun against each other,' instead of seeing an actual competitor and wanting to beat them."

During meets, Northfield typically squeezes into the end of the pool deck opposite the starting blocks to cheer on their teammates in that race. Since that kind of close proximity will not be allowed this year, the Gators will be spread out and bordering the entire pool deck, as well as the stands, to cheer while socially distant from each other.

"It's going to be a lot different to not be able to be huddled and be close to do our regular cheers," Malecha said, "but I guess we're pretty loud, so we'll be able to do it from a distance."

Through the first week and a half of practice, Northfield's captains have adapted a normal team tradition to make sure voices are still heard across practice sessions. Typically, the Gators would form a "circle of positivity" at the end of every practice to publicly acknowl-

## SWIMMING AND DIVING SCHEDULE

Aug. 27 — vs. Rochester Century  
Sept. 1 — vs. Mankato East  
Sept. 3 — vs. Rochester John Marshall  
Sept. 8 — vs. Faribault  
Sept. 10 — vs. Mankato West  
Sept. 17 — vs. Austin  
Sept. 24 — vs. Albert Lea  
Oct. 1 — vs. Red Wing  
Oct. 6 — vs. Owatonna  
Oct. 17 — Big 9 Conference championships

edge teammates they thought had a particularly impressive session or showed they were a good teammate.

Since the team is split into two practice groups, the concept has morphed into the "bucket of positivity." If a member of the team has a teammate they want to recognize, they drop a piece of paper with the teammate's name on it and how they stood out into the bucket, and then all entries are read off at both practice sessions.

"It's hard to create that team atmosphere and have that connection with the rest of the team when you literally do not see their faces every day," Hanifl said. "It's something we're struggling with, but us captains and seniors have talked about finding ways we can stay connected with the rest of the team."

Reach Sports Editor Michael Hughes at 645-1106 or follow him on Twitter @NFNewsSports. © Copyright 2020 APG Media of Southern Minnesota. All rights reserved.



Northfield senior Ellen Varley will be one of four captains for the Gators this year along with seniors Alanah Barnes, Kaylee Malecha and Zibby Hanifl. (File Photo)

## HIGH SCHOOL CROSS COUNTRY



From left to right, seniors Erica Loe, Claire Bussman, Nicole Theberath, Carter Lefkowitz, Martin Brice and Jacob Lockner are the captains for this year's boys and girls Northfield cross country teams. The Raiders start their season Thursday in Faribault. (Michael Hughes/Northfield News)

## After busy summers, Northfield boys and girls cross country teams ready to flash their speed

By MICHAEL HUGHES  
michael.hughes@apgsomn.com

After a summer in which most forms of entertainment outside the house were shuttered, the Northfield boys and girls cross country teams decided to do something productive.

They ran, and they ran a lot. The result, with the help of both squads returning the bulk of their experience from last season, are quick groups for both the boys and the girls entering Thursday's season-opening race in Faribault.

"We had a really good turnout for summer practices this year, which is really exciting," senior Claire Bussman said. "I think everybody is just excited for the opportunity to race."

"It's been exciting to see everyone improving," senior Erica Loe added. "A lot of people put in the miles over the summer, so it's exciting to see how strong this team is."

Bussman, Loe and senior Nicole Theberath are the three captains for the girls team, while seniors Martin Brice, Jacob Lockner and Carter Lefkowitz are the three captains for this year's boys team.

"I'm really just happy there's a season this year," Lefkowitz said. "I was really worried there wouldn't be." Thursday's dual Faribault meet will kick off a 2020 campaign that will be devoid of the typical crowded invitationals that populate a cross country schedule.

Part of that is there's also no set plan for a Section 1AA meet for a state meet, although there's been no official cancellation and the details of both are still to be decided.

"If there's a state meet that would be really cool, because we only had a couple seniors that graduated," Lockner said. "Our main varsity is returning, and a lot of them have been improving a lot from last year."

"With the young kids coming up we'll have a strong team," Bussman added. "Especially toward the end when we're tapered, I think it could be really exciting."

Brice, especially, is hoping for a chance to race at the section meet after he missed out on qualifying for state by one spot last fall.

"I'm pretty excited and feel like with my senior year this is sort of my last chance," Brice

## CROSS COUNTRY SCHEDULE

Aug. 27 — at Faribault, boys at 3:30 p.m., girls at 5 p.m.  
Sept. 3 — vs. Winona, girls at 3:30 p.m., boys at 5 p.m.  
Sept. 10 — at Rochester Century, boys at 3:30 p.m., girls at 5 p.m.  
Sept. 16 — vs. Red Wing, Rochester John Marshall, girls at 3:30 p.m., boys at 5 p.m.  
Sept. 24 — at Mankato East, boys at 4 p.m., girls at 5:30 p.m.  
Oct. 1 — at Albert Lea, girls at 3:30 p.m., boys at 5 p.m.  
Oct. 8 — at Owatonna, Big 9 Conference meet (girls), 2:45 p.m.  
Oct. 9 — at Owatonna, Big 9 Conference meet (boys), 2:45 p.m.

said. "I'm pretty excited to throw down some pretty good finishes this season."

That's part of a complicated goal structure the Raiders have established this year. Last week, Northfield set up a series of go levels for its preseason goals.

The first level are "process goals," which can range from sleeping for a certain amount of hours each week, drinking a certain amount of water a day or setting aside a specific amount of time each day for stretching. Then, there are "time goals," which differ for each runner depending on how quick they want their personal-best time to be this year.

After that, are the team's "dream goals," which might take a few years to officially tick off, or specify where the team might finish at the Big 9 Conference meet or any potential section or state meets.

"I would definitely like to see us in the top two in the conference for the girls," Theberath said. "Especially with the season ending at conference, perhaps, I think it's good to have that goal that's realistic, and we can always switch it to sections or state."

Reach Sports Editor Michael Hughes at 645-1106 or follow him on Twitter @NFNewsSports. © Copyright 2020 APG Media of Southern Minnesota. All rights reserved.