

KSPORTS

New Cross Country coach joins McNary; preaches hard work, fun

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

Josh Christensen has been passionate about running for the vast majority of his life. Starting next fall, the Salem native will be bringing his zeal for cross country and track to Keizer.

Earlier this month, Christensen was named the head cross county coach at McNary High School. He will also work at the school as a math teacher and serve as an assistant coach on the track & field staff.

While Christensen is the program's third coach in three seasons, the 31-year old made it clear that he wants to be at the school for the long haul.

"I'm so excited. This is actually the dream job. It's the job that I anticipate to be at for the next 20-plus years. I am very excited to return to Salem-Keizer," Christensen said. "I want the current athletes to know that I'm the last cross country coach they are going to have at McNary. I'm going in with the attitude that I am going to coach some of these kids' kids."

In just over a decade of coaching, Christensen has already made a name for himself in numerous spots along the West Coast.

After a successful career as a student-athlete at Salem Academy High School, Christensen became the sprints coach for the track team at his alma-mater, guiding the 4x100 relay team to a state title in 2010.

Christensen left the Salem area to compete in track and cross country for Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif for two years before returning to the Willamette Valley to be an assistant for Salem Academy's cross country team in 2013.

In 2014, Christensen got the opportunity to fulfill a coaching dream, working with local legend Don Berger. Berger was the track and cross country coach at North Salem High School for more than four decades and was even recognized as the 2016 National Coach of the Year for girls track and field by the National Federation of State High School Associations Coaches Association.

Even though Christensen was Berger's assistant for just a few months, the experience had a profound impact on him.

"That was a bucket list experience for me. I had always wanted to work in a program with Don. Getting to coach under him was awesome and inspirational. That season was absolutely pivotal in my coaching experience. I just learned that you can take coaching seriously and it could be something that you could do forever," Christensen said.

Christensen went back to Santa Barbara to coach and teach at Dos Pueblos High School, becoming the head cross country coach in 2015 and

the head track and field coach in 2016. He helped send the cross country team to the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) finals in his first year at the helm of the cross country team and coached multiple kids that set school records and went onto Division I programs.

"I inherited a good program and we were able to keep the ball rolling," Christensen said. "I learned a lot real quick. I felt like I started to find my sweet spot as a coach."

Christensen, along with his wife, Emily, moved to Portland in 2017. Despite not being connected in the coaching scene at the time, Christensen wound up being hired to coach at Columbia River High School in Vancouver.

Although the program had struggled in recent years, Christensen took the team from placing eighth in the district to competing for a state championship just two years later. The squad also tripled in size during his tenure.

"People started believing that we could do some really good stuff. It was a really big jump. A lot of it was just a change in confidence," Christensen said.

Christensen's peers took notice of Columbia River's success as he was named the 2018-19 Vancouver Public Schools Coach of the Year and the 2019 Greater St. Helens League Coach of the Year for boys cross country.

"Josh is truly a great coach in every aspect. It is very clear that he has a huge passion for the sport and it is truly infectious. I feel like I wouldn't have nearly as successful or fall so deeply in love with the sport of running without Josh. It felt very clear that he cares deeply about his athletes and wants to work with them to find and obtain their own version of success. He is able to channel everyone's strengths and passion to make seasons really enjoyable and exciting," said former Columbia River runner Theron Kramer. "He challenged me and pushed me to achieve goals I didn't even consider were possible at the time. I didn't even consider running in college, but by track season senior year I had a couple local schools reach out to me. I think that was because of how he pushed me towards those goals that I set for myself. I have only great things to say about him as a coach and person."

Christensen has coached a litany of high-level runners over the last decade, but one of the biggest staples of his program is creating a team for everyone, where all athletes have a role.

"I want to facilitate opportunities for athletes to have fun, to make memories and to be a part of something bigger than themselves," Christensen said. "And part of having fun and making memories is competing at a high level. Everyone has a role on the team. You don't have to be a part of the top seven to be a part of the



Josh Christensen is the new head coach for McNary High School cross country

Photo by MATT RAWLINGS of Keizertimes

program. That is a signature part of my coaching style, everyone is very involved regardless of how fast they are."

One of the mothers of Christensen's former athletes will always be appreciative of Christensen's approach to coaching, as well as the role that he played in her son's life.

Peggie Moreno-Lore's son, Issac, was diagnosed with autism at the age of five. She admitted that he struggled to make friends in middle school, and was worried about how he would handle his four years of high school.

She convinced Issac to go out for cross country, where he quickly found a passion for running and an atmosphere to create lasting friendships under the watchful eye of Christensen. In his first year with the team, Issac was given the Most Improved award at the end of the season.

Issac is now in college and runs on his own nearly every day. Moreno Lore credits Christensen for helping her son develop his new passion.

"Coach Christensen really looked out for Isaac and challenged him around every corner. He was kind to Isaac and really taught him how to be safe and how to take care of his body," Moreno-Lore said. "The team was something we were all excited to be a part of. From summer camps to far away invitationals, we were along for the ride. He is a trusted individual and is highly regarded among the athletes and parents, past and present. He helped my kid learn a lifelong skill. I am forever grateful for him as a coach and a friend."

Christensen has spent the last two seasons as an assistant cross country and track coach at Lincoln High School — he will remain with Lincoln until the end of the 2022 track season.

As a nationally renowned program, Christensen helped the team build on their success. Both boys' and girls' teams finished in the top 20 in the nation and got the chance to compete in the National meet in Huntsville, Ala.

Lincoln head coach Eric Dettman mentioned that he was most impressed with Christensen's ability to develop the team's younger runners.

"Josh is a supremely talented young coach and I'm excited to watch his work within the McNary program. His stint at Lincoln, though short, has been instrumental in continuing to develop a winning culture within our program," Dettman said. "Halfway through our past XC season, I asked Josh to primarily focus on our freshman boys as they weren't progressing the way I'd hoped. He began writing workouts and instilling a sense of pride within that group that showed in the classroom, at practice and during competition. From that point forward they acted like completely different people, motivated and thirsty for more. It was no surprise to me that our freshman improved tremendously in the six weeks that he led them.

"I'm so excited for this next opportunity for Josh, and although I'm sad he won't be part of our program, I know he's going to do incredible things at McNary. Josh is a leader wherever he goes and I can't wait to watch that program thrive."