



## **Brian Dempsey: Lessons from Geese**

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**Arizona Track**

8/21/10 - One of the lessons from a popular motivational video frequently shown to sports teams, called Lessons from Geese, is that, "People who share a sense of community can help each other get where they are going more easily...because they are traveling on the trust of one another."

Brian Dempsey is the head cross country coach at Sandra Day O'Connor High School, and he shows this video to his squad each year at camp. Dempsey is also the meet director for the Meet of Champions.

"It's a neat story and cool lessons about what those geese do," Dempsey said. "We're the Eagles, but our team mascot is the Canadian goose. We take a fake stuffed goose to our meets, and many people ask us what's up with the goose. It's our team motto; deal with it!"

So when someone brings up the Arizona Interscholastic Association in a discussion, the word that comes to mind for Dempsey is frustration.

"I've only been the head coach for nine years, and I've talked to guys that have been around longer, and they say it hasn't changed much in the last 20 or 30 years," Dempsey said. "I don't get the process. All of us as coaches are asked to do something, we all come to an agreement, and it's the opposite of what we've agreed to."

Perhaps the AIA should have taken the lesson of creating a sense community from the geese.

Arizona Track also had the opportunity to discuss the Arizona Interscholastic Association's recent overhauling of the format for individual and team state tournaments with Dempsey.

"It's a step in the right direction, especially for cross country with the qualifier," Dempsey said. "All teams racing at state was ridiculous last year; now you've got to earn your place."

For Cross Country (192 boys teams, 188 girls teams), the sport will reduce from six meets to four. Each division will have three sectionals, and the top 50 percent and top five individuals not on one of the qualifying teams.

Track and Field (220 boys teams, 208 girls teams) was reduced from five state meets to four with automatic and provisional qualifiers (similar to the NCAA Indoor Championship system), varying by division, to select a field of 24 at most.

But the AIA's timing of releasing what schools are in what division and section have left Dempsey feeling a little nicked.

"Not having it all set up before the season starts is very disappointing. Don't know what division or section until the end of August or the first week of September," Dempsey said. "I understand what they're trying to do and how they have to take the enrollment and there's some programs that won't have it anymore, so they have to divide it fairly equally, but that's what the summer is for."

Dempsey also noted that regardless of changes, his teams will still be able to compete with top programs in the state.

"We're not going to stop practice or stop training because we don't know what position we're in," Dempsey said. "That's my philosophy and how we run our program. It would be nice to know who's in our section, but that's out of our control."

Dempsey has been involved in running since age nine. He attended a division three college in Maryland, and started coaching his senior year of college.



He moved to Arizona 15 years ago and got his start in coaching with a club team. Dempsey's club coach influenced a lot of the things he now does with the O'Connor team. That coach passed away 10 years ago.

Dempsey was also greatly influenced by his high school coach back in Maryland, who is now going into his thirty fourth year as a coach there.

"I've followed in the footsteps of my high school coach; taken a lot from what he has done," Dempsey said. "I got the job at O'Connor when it first opened, and I'm just plugging away there building a family. Especially just starting and seeing our program grow; the first year we had eight kids, now close to 60 kids for cross country this year."

And has the team grown—not just in numbers, but success. The O'Connor girls cross country team won three state titles in the last four years (2007, 2008, 2009) and were runner-up in 2006, not to mention a handful of individual state champions.

"2007 was an incredible, incredible year and story," Dempsey said. "We got picked to go to the Nike Team Nationals, and our state team scored 21 points at the state meet. It's still the lowest score at a state meet, so everything just clicked and going to Nike was the ultimate experience for those girls."

The state titles and experiences are great, but Dempsey said his favorite part of his job is keeping in touch with past graduates of his program.

"I love that my all of my former athletes call me for advice, or text me I should say," Dempsey said. "This is great, because this past summer I was able to go back east and have lunch with my high school coach. It's been absolutely awesome."

Dempsey wants to postpone any comment about whether his teams would win state this year until the team has been placed in a section.

Both the O'Connor boys and girls cross country teams have really bought into the "Lessons from Geese", and everyone is ready to hit the ground running this season—no pun intended.

"We're excited to start the season at the Sole Sports Running Zone XC Festival," Dempsey said. "It's been a long summer, and the kids worked so hard putting in the miles and going to our camp up in Prescott. They truly made the commitment and sacrificed quite a lot."