

# Foot Locker Western Cross Country Seeded Races

by Doug Speck

Some great racing took place on a dry and, as many runners commented, very dusty day at the Mt. San Antonio College course, Saturday, December 4th. Over 3,000 runners competed in twenty-five races to sort out the eight male and eight female athletes who would head for Orlando in a week to see who would earn national bragging rights. With the strength and breadth of this region of the country—schools spread from Wyoming to New Mexico, from Alaska down to California, and all across—there was no shortage of people with solid credentials from this year and last.



## Girls' Race

Most pre-race speculation focused on a good race between last year's third and fourth placers nationally, Sara Bei (Calif.) and Felicia Guilford (NM). Both were undefeated this fall, with Guilford handling a great group in the Great American Cross Country Festival in North Carolina in September, and Bei emerging from late October's Mt. SAC Invitational with the day's quickest time on that tough course. A flock of other great athletes would also grace the field. Such was the caliber of athletes that even the deepest thought on a top-eight prediction would change fifteen seconds later upon some other ideas on the order. This is why we settle it on the course!

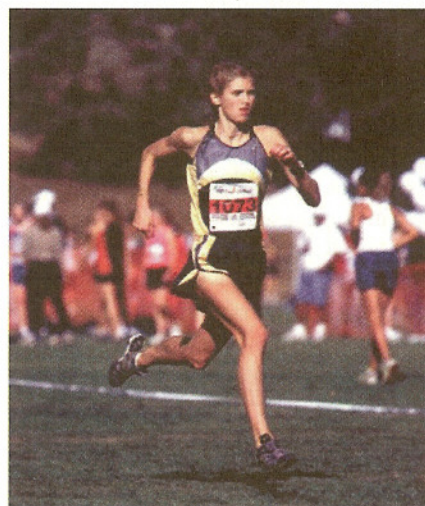
A field of nearly 140 athletes zoomed out, with Madera (Calif.) star Heather Hanson, usually a quick starter (she led the California Division I race early on the week previous), shooting out into the lead. Hanson was just over 2:40 for the first 880, quite honestly a bit

slower than it would have seemed the pack would go out. Last year, 1997 national runner-up Mariel Ettinger (Ore.) raced the fastest first mile ever during this event (5:05), only to fade later on and not qualify for the nationals. Maybe people wanted to wait a bit, maybe they learned from last year or whatever, but the slower start appeared quite deliberate by most this year.

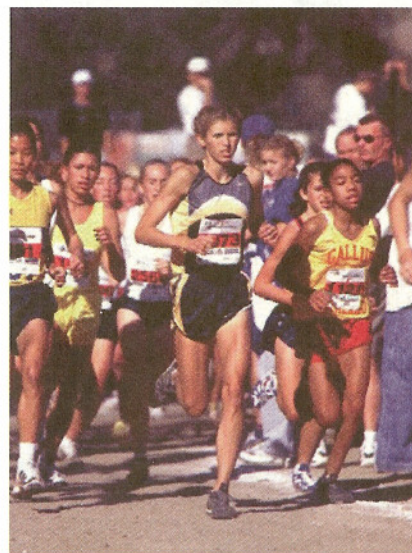
Just at the mile mark, Abby Miller (Nev.), a two-time national qualifier, shot by Hanson (5:25 there), and the racing was on. Julie Allen (Calif.), Sara Gorton (Ariz.), Felicia Guilford (NM) and other expected stars were up in the front pack just behind Miller. Sara Bei was back just a tad, but in good shape there, a position she typically races in early in the big affairs.

Up over the switchback loop, Bei moved steadily up through the lead pack of runners, not an easy task with this quality of athlete ahead of her. As the group headed down onto the concrete airstrip at a mile-and-a-half, Bei had broken away from the entire field, with her move on the up-and-down switchback hill section more than a slightly bold statement. At that point Guilford held second, with a pack following the New Mexico athlete: Laura Ziegler, Alejandra Barrientos, Sarah Gorton, Alicia Craig, Abby Miller, Julie Allen, Valerie Flores, and Victoria Chang.

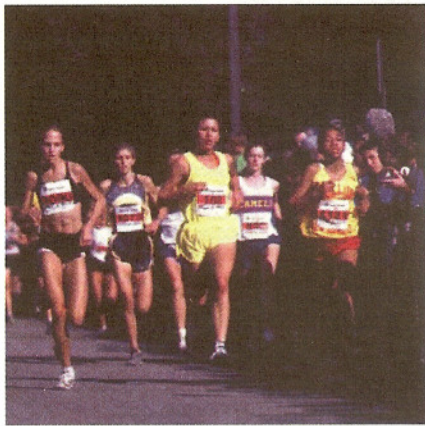
Bei's lead continued with a report from behind Reservoir Hill, with spectators shocked when the race up Reservoir Hill suddenly had Felicia Guilford out into the lead and Bei fading back through the top placers. Down onto the airstrip, with 650 meters to go until the 5000 meter finish line, it was Guilford with a narrow lead over surprising Wyoming athlete Alicia Craig, leader of the nation's top-ranked 1998 prep squad, Campbell County HS of Gillette under coach Orville Hess. Down the airstrip, and up past the regular course finish line put the field up onto the track, with Guilford there a 20-meter lead over Craig. As the pack came onto the track



Sara Bei was in ninth place, with a stride that showed no ability to up the pace and pick someone off for a qualifying spot. The next excitement came when Guilford, running clockwise around the track and into the north turn, 150 meters from home, suddenly fell. Craig was in full stride by that time, zooming by, with Guilford rising to her feet, and suddenly regaining a respectable pace that showed the ability to finish in the top eight if she could make it across the line. Craig sailed in, a thirty-five meter winner over Guilford 18:07-18:13, with Victoria Chang (18:14), Laura Zeigler (18:16), surprising Valerie Flores (18:21),







Alejandra Barrientos (18:21), Anita Siraki (18:23) and Abby Miller (18:24) following her. The top eight had mightily broken away, with 27 seconds separating Miller from Phebe Ko in ninth (18:51), with Sara Bei 10th at 18:53.

Most in the top group needed some assistance afterwards. The dry weather had dust from the course mixed in this day. Regarding Guiliford's fall, the natural thought was that racing the wrong way (clockwise instead of counter), she simply tripped on the curb at the end of a long race. Not so, as she indicated that she has asthma, and the dry day and dust really added to problems in addition to the natural running fatigue racing at this level, and she simply collapsed. An amazing athlete, she rose to give it a great effort over the final 150 meters. It was definitely a tougher day to race on than last year, where Bei won at 17:51, with that December crispness replaced this day by probably 8-12 degrees and a level of dryness and dust that turned the contest into a surprisingly tough one.

Many of the qualifying group know each other well, with Abby Miller the acknowledged qualifier's "official greeter," congratulating all on their efforts and expressing dismay at buddy Bei's non-qualification. Sara showed class, patiently answering questions and smiling for pictures at the awards ceremony. The Montgomery of Santa Rosa junior is human and that couple of percent off her act this day against this quality field made it impossible to qualify.

Last year's top eight group had a gap of 46 seconds; this year it was down to 17 seconds. The same gap this time around would have had Sara as the final qualifier.

The west has a super group this time around, with the 1998 squad dominating the national competition with five in the

top ten. Based on today's performances, the 1999 group should not be far behind.

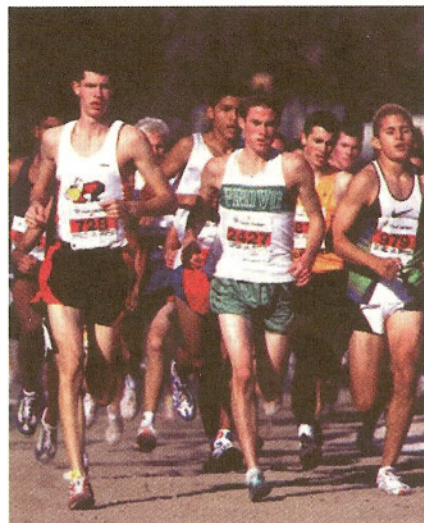
### Boys' Race

The boys' race had a number of very strong athletes also. Attention up front centered on two undefeated athletes. Josh Rohatinsky (Utah), last year's champ here, and Ian Dobson (Oregon) were both very strong in a number of competitions this fall. Josh was fifth last year and Dobson seventh in the national competition and all who viewed their running were duly impressed.

The refusal by Foot Locker officials to allow limitation of this field sent almost 250 athletes off at the start here, with some horror stories in the early traffic along the way. South Eugene (Ore.) star Erik Heinonen was part of a group that was tripped in the early running, but was able to work himself up from 175th to 10th. Clearly some impressive running, but futile and frustrating as far as nationals qualifying was concerned.

The better athletes sensed the need to get out quickly. Humberto Vargas (Belmont, LA) and Jon Rankin (Spring Valley, Monte Vista, Calif.) led early, with the pace through the mile 4:35. By that point, Rohatinsky and Dobson had eased into the lead, racing along side by side, with the rest of the field backed off a bit, as if they had already given the first two spots to those individuals.

Up and over the hilly switchback loop past the mile, the front duo from Utah and Oregon rolled along, with Golden Harper (Utah), Fernando Cabada (Calif.), Augie Escobar (Calif.) and assorted others trailing a bit behind.



Stride for stride off the hill onto the airstrip in front of the huge crowd, Rohatinsky and Dobson purred along, with Harper and Escobar leading a second pack of seven a ways behind.

Behind Reservoir Hill, the report was that Rohatinsky and Dobson were close, with the run up that final tough hill viewed with real interest. Last year, Rohatinsky had made his big move into the lead during this last up-hill segment, and he later related that things fell into place that way this time around as well. With a "heads-down" determined effort he pulled away from Dobson to a slight breaking of contact by the top (12:30 at that two-and-a-half mile point). Josh continued to power on the down-grade. Dobson later commented that his thoughts late in the race were to ensure qualifying, leaving a listener with the sense that he and coach Marnie Mason-Johnson (herself an eighth placer in the Foot Locker (then Kinney) national finals in 1984 for Klamath HS) were leaving a little in the tank for next week.

As the race headed for the track and 250 meters to go, Golden Harper and Augie Escobar continued to run strongly, with the next group of four moving away from the rest of the field for the qualifying spots. Daniel Mejia (Calif.) blasted the final 600 meters to move into fifth, one second behind Escobar at the end, with California State Div I. champ Travis Laird, Eric Logdson (Ore.) and surprising Jesse McLeod (Calif.) the only shocking surprise on this half of the qualifiers.

McLeod, buried in the far northern section of California at Lassen HS in Susanville, was second in the California State Meet in Division IV, with a time that did not indicate qualifying possibilities here. However, when they went out on the course, he raced hard and finished strong, marking another come-through performance by an athlete from a school with a long distance tradition, begun under coach Bob Wall, who is still a teacher at the school.

The boys' squad will be a good one, with all having shown their ability to race very strongly away from home. The Nationals contest will be an interesting one, both individually and from the team standpoint.

See you in a week in Florida!

**CT&RN**