The Best Thing I Saw at State

One Final Stride, A Race to Remember

Mason Kelly's photo-finish victory highlights the perseverance, preparation, and championship culture behind Episcopal's historic cross country program.

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



By Ethan W. Anderson

NATCHITOCHES — "Our sport is your sport's punishment."

As Spencer Verret recently said on The Beyond Pod: Inside the LHSAA, it is a fitting way to describe the sport of cross country. In most sports, running is something athletes are asked to do when they make a mistake, need conditioning, or are looking for an extra edge. For cross country runners, it is the competition itself.

But running nearly three miles is about much more than physical endurance. It is a mental battle that requires discipline, patience, and the ability to push through when your body is telling you to slow down. Runners must know when to conserve energy, when to make a move, and when to find something left in the tank.

Photos by 5 Shot Media



At the 2026 Sugar Bowl LHSAA State Cross Country Meet, those qualities were on full display in the Division IV boys' race.

With a state championship on the line, Episcopal senior Mason Kelly and John Curtis Christian's Blake Bordelon found themselves in a battle that would come down to the final strides. One runner had to overcome a stumble. The other had to find one last gear.

After nearly three miles, just 0.7 seconds would separate the two. And that is what made this one of the best things I saw at state. Bordelon had led for much of the Division IV boys' race. But as the runners approached the final turn before entering the track, a stumble threatened to change everything.

Bordelon went down momentarily, but almost as quickly as he fell, he was back on his feet and moving forward. He maintained his pace, refusing to let the misstep derail what had been an outstanding race.

Just behind him, Kelly saw an opportunity.

Approximately 10 feet separated the two runners as they approached the track. Kelly began closing the gap, setting the stage for a finish neither runner would soon forget.

As they entered the track, Bordelon still held the advantage. But within the next several strides, Kelly had pulled even and moved into the lead. Bordelon wasn't finished.

As the pair approached the final curve, he found another gear, fought his way back in front, and carried the lead into the final stretch in front of the grandstands.

With only a couple hundred meters remaining, it appeared Bordelon might have done enough to hold off Kelly's final charge. But Kelly had one more push left.

Using his long strides and every ounce of energy remaining, the Episcopal senior continued to close the distance. Bordelon fought to maintain his advantage, but Kelly was gaining ground with every step.

At the finish line, there was almost nothing separating them. The results told the story.

Kelly crossed in 16:02.3, edging Bordelon's 16:03.0 by just 0.7 seconds to claim the Division IV individual state championship.

Two runners. Nearly three miles. Less than one second between them. It was the kind of finish that reminds you why we watch sports in the first place.

Photos by 5 Shot Media



For Kelly, the championship was the culmination of four years of work in an Episcopal uniform.

The senior had steadily improved throughout his high school career, gaining experience and moving closer to the top of the state leaderboard.

As a freshman, Kelly finished 22nd with a time of 17:14.7. He followed that with a 19th-place finish as a sophomore in 17:17.3 before making a significant jump as a junior, placing seventh in Division III with a time of 16:31.0.

This season, he put it all together.

When asked about the final 200 meters and what was going through his mind as he approached the finish line, Kelly credited the preparation and instruction he had received throughout the season.

"I was just listening to my coaches, and they were saying to stay with him until you get to the track," Kelly said. "At each 100 meters on the track, we pick up, so I was just thinking to stay with him, and I'd be able to do it. We've been working on sprinting at the finish."

That preparation also shaped his approach to the mental side of racing.

"With running a lot of races, I know for me at least, the back-and-forth game doesn't really work in the end," Kelly said. "I know that sitting behind whoever I'm racing and coming back at the end works really well for me."

Photos by 5 Shot Media

After nearly three miles of running, Kelly trusted that approach one final time. And when he crossed the finish line, he still wasn't quite sure what he had accomplished.

"I did not know," Kelly said. "It took a second. I was leaning over, and then the guy pulled me to the first-place chair and not the second-place one. I thought, 'Oh wow, I just won this. That's crazy.'"

For a senior who had spent four years working toward that moment, the realization was finally there. He was a state champion. But Kelly's journey to that finish line was about much more than individual results.

"Just running on this team has been such an integral part of me becoming who I am," Kelly said.

He pointed to a familiar saying within the Episcopal program that reflects the priorities instilled in its student-athletes.

"The motto that we break out to every day is, 'Go Knights, Good People, Have Fun, State Champs!' In that order," Kelly said. "I think that's really important because we prioritize being good people, and then letting the rest follow, and giving it to God and praying, knowing that He is there in those toughest moments."

It is a motto that says plenty about the culture Kelly has experienced throughout his time at Episcopal. Championships are the goal, but the people athletes become along the way matter even more.

Kelly's story doesn't end on the cross country course.

Just two days after winning an individual state championship, he was back competing at the state level, this time in the pool at the 2026 Sugar Bowl LHSAA State Swimming Meet in Sulphur.

Kelly is a four-sport athlete at Episcopal, competing in cross country, swimming, indoor track, and outdoor track.

Balancing four sports presents its own challenges, but for Kelly, the opportunity to compete alongside his teammates makes it worthwhile.

"It's tough balancing it all," Kelly said. "It's just the feeling you get when you're with the team and you can do something great, like we did today and like we did on Monday. That feeling is just unmatched. It's so great."

His return to swimming this season was another example of his willingness to contribute wherever he could.

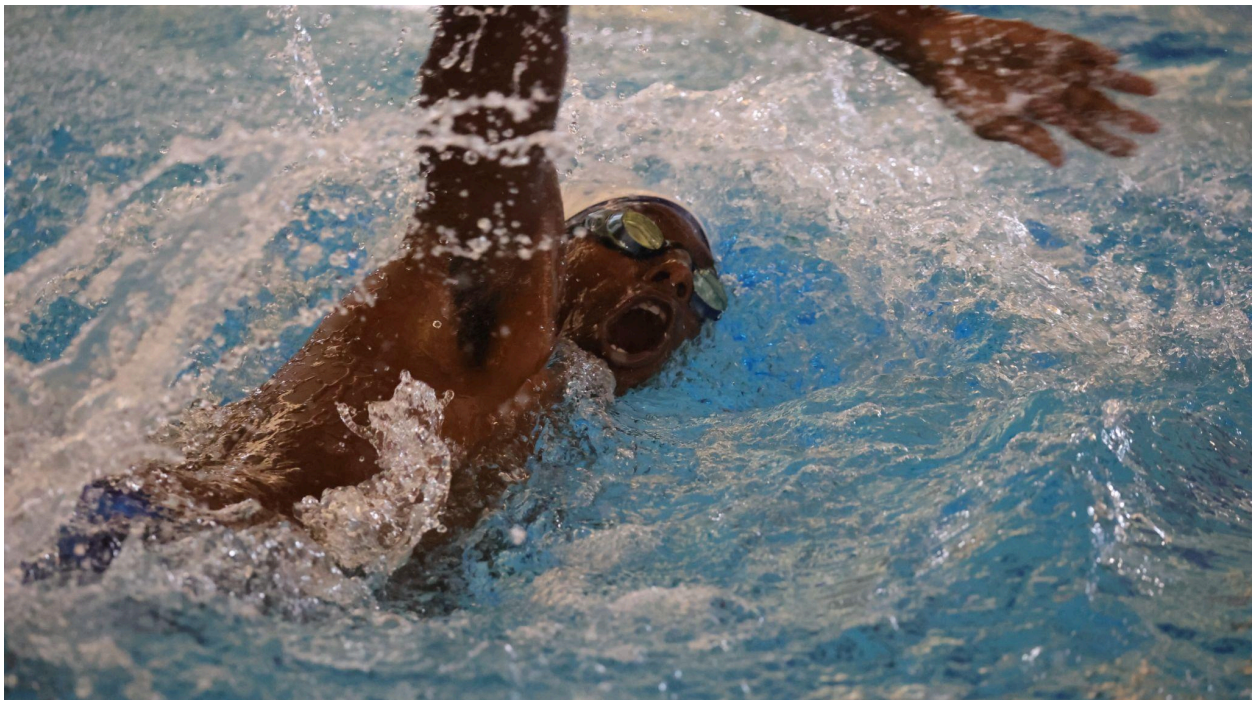
After swimming in middle school, Kelly had stepped away from the sport before Episcopal swim coach Anderson approached him about returning to the pool.

Photos by 5 Shot Media

"I just got back into swimming this year. I used to swim in middle school, and Coach Anderson said, 'Hey, we need you on the swim team.' I said, 'Absolutely, I'll do it,' so I got back into swimming," Kelly said.

Despite not having spent much time in the pool recently, Kelly embraced the opportunity to help his team compete for a championship.

"I hadn't been swimming much, and then we got here, and I'm like, 'Okay, this is it. I have to do this. I have to help my team,'" Kelly said. "Obviously, we have Jack McConnell, who could have swam everything easily by himself, but it's just knowing that I'm participating in a team that had the ability to do something great, and did. That makes it feel that much better."



Kelly made the most of his final appearance at the LHSAA Division IV State Swimming Championship, competing in two individual events and contributing to Episcopal's success in the relays.

Individually, Kelly finished 10th in the 50-yard freestyle with a time of 25.78 seconds, improving on his preliminary time of 25.95. He also placed 10th in the 100-yard freestyle, touching the wall in 59.18 seconds after swimming a 1:00.78 in preliminaries.

His contributions extended to the relay events, where Kelly opened Episcopal's 200-yard freestyle relay with a 24.09-second split as the team finished third overall in 1:45.31.

He also helped the Knights capture the Division IV title in the 400-yard freestyle relay, joining Andrew White, Dylan Finan, and Jack McConnell for a first-place finish in 3:36.92.

Photos by 5 Shot Media



From an individual state championship on the cross country course to helping his teammates capture a relay state championship in the pool, Kelly's week was another reminder of the value of multi-sport athletes and the team-first mentality they bring to their schools.

There is something refreshing about that perspective. Rather than allowing one championship to define his season, Kelly continues to embrace the opportunity to compete, represent his school, and be part of something bigger than himself.

The yellow jerseys and navy shorts of Episcopal are familiar sights across Louisiana cross country and track and field.

The programs have combined for 72 state championship titles, including Episcopal's 40th cross country team championship, continuing a tradition built over generations of student-athletes.

At the center of that tradition is veteran head coach Clancy Duplechin, affectionately known as Coach Dupe, who is celebrating 50 years of coaching, including 48 at Episcopal in Baton Rouge.

Championship programs don't sustain themselves simply by having talented athletes walk through the door each year. They are built through consistency, preparation, expectations, and a culture that challenges student-athletes to become better.

Duplechin has spent decades establishing that standard at Episcopal. His program has developed generations of distance runners, creating an environment where success is expected but never taken for granted.

For Kelly, the coach who has led the program throughout his high school career has been a constant presence.

"Coach Dupe has been there forever and has always been my head coach," Kelly said. "I couldn't see the Episcopal program without him. He's a steadfast leader that always provides support whenever we need him."

Mason Kelly is a product of that culture.

When those around Kelly talk about him, the first things that come to mind aren't necessarily his athletic accomplishments. They are his kindness, respect for others, work ethic, and the way he represents his school.

“Mason is humble, selfless, and hardworking,” said Episcopal AD Brent Broussard. “He always puts the team first, and will do what it takes to be successful. The day after cross country this year, he was on campus at 7 AM leading a food drive collection effort. This is one of many examples of his character.”

His character is what people notice first. His athletic ability is another reflection of the dedication and commitment he brings to everything he does.

Photos by 5 Shot Media



When asked what he hopes people remember about him after his time at Episcopal, Kelly didn't point to a championship or an individual accomplishment. Instead, he pointed to the people who have helped shape his experience.

"It's the community," Kelly said. "I think the people that I've been around and grown up around, and the teachers and the support staff that we've had, the coaches, it's just been everything. It's been really helpful to my development."

For Kelly, the experience of competing for a team is part of what makes high school athletics special. Individual results matter, but the opportunity to represent your school and contribute to a shared goal is what makes the experience memorable.

The final results will forever show Mason Kelly as the 2026 Division IV individual state champion, with a time of 16:02.3.

They will also show an Episcopal team celebrating another milestone in a program filled with championship history.

But the best thing I saw at state was about more than a time, a title, or a trophy.

It was two runners giving everything they had over nearly three miles, refusing to give in when the finish line was within reach. It was one athlete recovering from a stumble and another finding just enough strength for one final stride.

It was also a reminder that behind every championship program are years of preparation, people who invest in others, and student-athletes who represent something bigger than themselves.

At Episcopal, that philosophy is reflected in a simple order of priorities: good people, have fun, state champs.

Sometimes, the difference between winning and finishing second is less than a second.

But what makes those moments special is everything it took to get there.

Author's Note: *In my role as the Director of Communications, I have the unique privilege of attending nearly all sanctioned LHSAA State Championship events. Although the schedule is demanding, I have the privilege of seeing student-athletes from all walks of life, united by two things: their participation in Louisiana high school sports and their pursuit of a state championship. In my first year in this role, I've gained a deeper appreciation for high school athletics and for all the dedication that goes into making each season and event possible. Although my current role involves less writing than my previous positions, it has given me the opportunity to return to something I've always loved. While much of my work now focuses on press releases and public statements, I also have the chance to reconnect with my passion for feature writing, this time highlighting what I consider the purest form of sport: high school athletics. The goal is to highlight the best thing I saw at each state championship and share the unknown stories behind these events, capturing memorable moments for student-athletes, coaches, administrators, officials, and everyone who makes Louisiana high school athletics special.*

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