**American Fork ready to roll at Utah state meet**

**By Doug Binder, DyeStat Editor**

American Fork is back on the fast track heading into Wednesday's Utah state meet.

The US#1 Cavemen are healthy and happy heading into the UHSAA Class 5A boys race at Sugar House Park where they plan to make amends for a third-place finish in 2015.

Senior **Casey Clinger**, who is also ranked No. 1 nationally as an individual, is back to defend his state title.

"It's been pretty special," Clinger said of the season so far. "We've been having a lot of fun and working hard in practice together. It will be a good race. All around it's been an awesome experience."

The team's stated goal is to 1-2-3 up front with Clinger, **McKay Johns** and **Patrick Parker**. That trio has finished 1-2-3 repeatedly over the course of the season. And even though there is a returning Foot Locker finalist in the 5A race, Weber's **Talon Hull**, a sweep of the top three spots is not out of the question.

"All three of them are pretty humble and pretty quiet," American Fork coach **Timo Mostert** said. "They go out and do their business. They are the best of friends and they are hard workers."

A year ago, Mostert said, American Fork went to to the starting line with three healthy athletes among the seven in the race. Johns was out, still recovering from a broken foot. Parker was fighting through a bout of walk pneumonia (and still finished ninth).

Meanwhile, strong teams from Davis and Lone Peak finished first and second and snapped a six-year run by American Fork (2009-14).

"State is a very big deal, so the fact that we got third last year makes it more important for us," Parker said. "We were all a little confused and a little hurt. We are going in with a new laser-like focus."

About a month later, at NXN Southwest in Arizona, American Fork was again the third best Utah team (behind Timpanogos and Lone Peak) and finished fourth. Still, the Cavemen advanced to NXN and continued to get stronger. In Portland, Clinger ran away from Carmel IN's **Ben Veatch** in the final stretch and a revitalized American Fork team placed second behing Great Oak CA.

AF was fifth at two miles and made up 36 points in the final third of the race. Clinger's individual win was balanced by a bittersweet feeling of taking second as a team.

"It's always good to run well individually but it's a lot better sharing the excitement and success with your team," Clinger said.

Perhaps because of the way 2015 played out, Clinger said he and his closest friends are more focused on the day to day details than ever.

"We've worked really hard to stay healthy," Clinger said. "We're focused on sleep and eating right. In that respect (2015) helped."

American Fork has qualified for NXN seven years in a row and finished second twice (2012 and 2015).

Mostert and other Utah coaches have the challenge of peaking their teams for state and then going back to training for a second build up to the regional and national meets. Utah's state meet is the earliest of any state in the lower 48.

American Fork is located between Salt Lake City and Provo. The high school's most successful programs are its marching band and its cross country team.

"We don't get as much hype, given how good we are, and Casey being a national champion who goes to our school," Parker said. "I'm not sure if (other students) don't respect it or don't know how much work and effort goes in."

Fanfare and respect is not a problem for anyone attached to the greater family of American Fork running. Clinger has aunts who fly in for meets from Boston and Florida. His grandparents flew to Portland to watch him at NXN last December.

"I know people snapped pictures of me hugging my grandma and grandpa at NXN last year  and those are photos are hanging in my kitchen right now," Clinger said. "Having so much support has been really special."

Clinger's younger brother, **Carson**, a sophomore, is the team's fourth man. Fellow sophomore **Dalton Brems** is the fifth.

"Every year has been a little different," Johns said. "This (year) has the highest individuals we have had. Usually it's been a little bit more of a pack. Now it's the three of us togetther, four and five together, and six and seven together."

Staying healthy may be the single most important factor to American Fork's chances of winning not only this week but at nationals, too.

The Cavemen are content to take those challenges one at a time and keep making progress each day.

"Right this second, it's all about state," Johns said. "When we talk about goals, we definitely do want to win nationals. It's a big goal for us."