

Meet in heat sends three to Cozad hospital Friday

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 13 September 2013 13:13 -



As the mercury climbed to 105 degrees Friday afternoon, the Swedes opening cross country meet in Cozad started as usual.

Shortly into the run, several competitors collapsed or became disoriented from what one emergency medical technician described as heat exhaustion, heat stroke or dehydration.

Cozad EMT Brian Woldt, who is also Dawson County's emergency management director, said two runners, including one from Gothenburg, were taken to the hospital by ambulance and one by private vehicle.

"Quite a few were escorted to the dunk tank," Woldt said. "Some got better after that and about 10 (were) treated in the clubhouse."

Although he said he's worked the Cozad meet for several years, this year was the worst because of the high temperature and humidity.

"You don't hold a cross country meet or track or anything when it's 105 degrees outside," Woldt said. "No one in their right mind should have been out there."

Cozad High School activities director Cory Spotanski said he was aware of the conditions and took precautionary measures such as filling two horse tanks with water and having ice and drinking water available.

The Cozad Rescue Squad and an athletic trainer were also on hand.

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“We never expected this to happen and I’m not sure what we could have done differently aside from moving the meet,” Spotanski said. “And hindsight gives a lot of wisdom.”

In the past, the meet has been on Thursday which—this year—was in the 90s at 4 p.m. (when the varsity girls started followed by varsity boys).

However the day of the meet was changed because Cozad played a home football game Thursday night.

In retrospect, Spotanski said meet organizers could have started the junior high race first since those youngsters run a mile.

However once the junior highers started, during the last race of the meet, some of the competitors still experienced problems with the heat.

PLEA TO SCHOOL BOARD
Instead of preparing for the consequences of sweltering heat Friday, former cross country assistant coach Curt Carakadon said the problem was having the cross country meet in the first place. Carakadon addressed the District 20 school board Tuesday night and said that rules be enacted about not having cross country meets on hot days or alternatively hosting them in the morning. He said Nebraska School Activities Association guidelines about lightning were followed during an Aug. 30 football game. “It’s no fun seeing kids laid out on the ground,” said an emotional Carakadon. “If you had treated the football game like that, you’d have firemen lining up pathways to prepare for lightning strikes.” Carakadon said as many as 15 runners collapsed on the course. “Cozad prepared well for the consequences but missed the point of the problem—heat,” he said. He added that school officials should have had the coverage not to send athletes to the meet, noting that other schools like Kearney and Holdrege didn’t send teams. The NSAA does have guidelines about heat fitness.

The athletic director, who competed in cross country in high school, said he talked to the coaches who brought teams to the event.

“No one was in favor of not having the meet and no one expressed concern,” he said.

Spotanski said he tries to do things to protect kids and showcase their talents at the same time.

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“Anytime you have an event, there’s a chance things could go wrong,” he said. “I think we did our best to be successful.”

In the future, he said changing the meet to morning would be considered.

Athletic trainer and EMT Alison Feik said that in addition to the heat, several other variables were present.

Feik said many kids don’t hydrate or eat properly.

“They’re already dehydrated,” she said. “Then they get hot and sweat and their blood sugar drops. By not being hydrated, they put their bodies through the extreme.”

Still, Feik said the best thing Friday would have been to cancel or change the meet to morning.

Woldt agreed, noting that water is the best hydration before competing—not Gatorade or Powerade—and no pop.

“Often kids don’t listen until they’re hit with something like this,” he said.

Had the athletes competed in the morning, Woldt said the meet would have been much different.

“Some blisters on feet, maybe some heat-related issues but nowhere near this bad,” he said. “After the first race (varsity girls), there were all kinds of people in the dunk tanks.”

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“I was hoping they would cancel it.”

Swede cross country coach Steve Reeves said he’s been concerned about excessive heat at the Cozad meet the past couple of years and visited with coaches from different schools in July about changing it to a morning event.

“What happened Friday is something I’ve not experienced in 35 years of coaching cross country,” Reeves said. “I feel terrible for all of the kids involved.”

Despite practicing in the heat, Reeves said a meet is a different story.

“It’s a whole different level when the gun goes off,” he said. “The intensity and emotions are greater.”

Reeves said the well being of student athletes is the most important.

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HISTORIC DAY FOR SWEDES

Despite adverse conditions at Friday's cross country meet, the day was one for the Swede history books. Instead of running 2.5 miles, since the sport started for them in Gothenburg in 1980, the hammers competed at the same distance as the boys which is 2.1 miles. The change, which was voted on by coaches, happened for all female cross-country competitors across Nebraska. Swede coach Steve Reeves

said he's opposed the change, not because girls can't compete at the distance, but because it's difficult to get large groups of kids to participate in the sport. He said the longer distance was approved because of scholarship reasons and Title IX, which creates more sports opportunities for women. Reeves, who competed in cross country for the Swedes in the 1970s, said the distance at the time for boys was 1.8 miles.