

Before the Gun Goes Off: The Stories That Will Define the 2026 NCAA Cross Country Season

XC-SPI / The Caso Index

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Abstract

The 2026 NCAA Division I cross country season does not begin with a blank slate. It begins with the emotional residue of the 2025 championship: Oklahoma State's redemption after an eighth-place 2024 finish, Habtom Samuel's breakthrough after consecutive NCAA runner-up finishes, NC State's return to the women's title after finishing eighth the year before, and Doris Lemngole ending Jane Hedengren's undefeated freshman cross country season in the championship race.^{2;3;5;6;8} This article treats those stories as context for the audited XC-SPI preseason ranking. The purpose of the model is not to replace narrative with decimals. It is to preserve what actually happened while preventing last year's school names, transfers, raw times, and incomplete rosters from becoming shortcuts for what the current teams are.

1. Last November Was Not a Spreadsheet

There is a temptation, when building a statistical ranking, to turn the 2025 NCAA Championship into a table and move on. That would miss what made the meet useful in the first place. The results are valuable because every athlete had to solve the same championship problem on the same morning. They also carried histories into the race that make the numbers legible.

Oklahoma State's men arrived at Gans Creek one year removed from an eighth-place NCAA finish with 256 points.² They left Columbia with 57 points, five scorers in the top 35, three in the top six, and the program's sixth national title.³ New Mexico's Habtom Samuel had finished second at the NCAA Cross Country Championship in each of his first two collegiate seasons; in 2025 he finally broke the race open late and won.⁵ NC State's women had fallen to eighth in 2024 after winning three consecutive titles, then returned in rain and mud to win their fourth championship in five seasons.^{6;7} BYU freshman Jane Hedengren had not lost a collegiate cross country race until defending champion Doris Lemngole beat her at the NCAA final.⁸

Those stories matter entering 2026. The numbers matter too, but principally because they keep the stories honest. XC-SPI begins with the 2025 championship because it is the strongest common-field evidence available. It does not begin there because last year's order deserves to be preserved. A team score belongs to the athletes who generated it at that moment. By August, some of those athletes have graduated, transferred, turned professional, developed on the track, or been replaced by people who were not in the championship picture nine months earlier.

Almost every obvious 2026 title story therefore contains a contradiction: the team with the best 2025 score has lost pieces; the individual champion is gone; the preseason No. 1 did not win last year; the defending women's champion looks unusually stable while its closest rival actually scored better in 2025 than it had while winning in 2024. That is the season XC-SPI is trying to describe.

2. Oklahoma State's 57 Points Were Redemption Before They Became a Roster Question

The cleanest place to begin is Oklahoma State, because the defending champion is only fourth in the XC-SPI Week 0 ranking.

That sounds strange until the 57 points are placed back into their story. Oklahoma State entered the 2024 NCAA meet as the defending champion and finished eighth. Brian Musau was fifth and Denis Kipngetich 11th, but the scoring five stretched to 110th overall.² Looking back after the 2025 victory, head coach Dave Smith called the previous championship “a low point” and described a group that responded by asking what needed to change rather than fragmenting.³

Then came Gans Creek. Musau finished fourth, Fouad Messaoudi fifth, Kipngetich sixth, Adisu Guadie 12th, and Ryan Schoppe 34th.^{1;3} Oklahoma State did not merely win; it compressed five scorers into the top 35 and put three orange jerseys almost together at the front. Fifty-seven points was the visible result of a team correcting almost everything that had gone wrong a year earlier.

Nothing in the preseason model changes that. The reason Oklahoma State is not automatically No. 1 in August is that the exact structure that produced 57 points no longer exists as a current-roster assumption. The program's 2026 material identifies Messaoudi and Schoppe as graduating seniors.¹⁶ Musau, Kipngetich, and Guadie leave the Cowboys with a front end capable of deciding a national meet, but the settled part of the November lineup becomes the uncertain part of September.

The central Oklahoma State question is therefore simple: who are four and five? If the Cowboys find two more championship scorers, a seventh national title is entirely plausible. If they do not, three extraordinary runners cannot make five-runner scoring disappear.

3. Habtom Samuel Finally Got the Ending He Had Chased – Then Left a Vacuum

New Mexico's championship morning had almost the opposite emotional shape. Samuel did not need to prove that he belonged at the front. He had already been NCAA runner-up twice. The missing piece was specific: he had not won the cross country title.

The 2025 race stayed crowded for much of the 10K. New Mexico's race account shows Samuel moving 12 places during the 8K-to-9K kilometer with a 2:37.4 split, taking control before running one of his fastest kilometers to the finish.⁵ Rocky Hansen tried to follow but could not close the separation. Samuel reached the final straight with enough space to celebrate a victory that had escaped him for two years. His post-race summary was almost comically concise: “This was my time.”⁵

The sentence matters now because Samuel is no longer part of the collegiate race. After adding more NCAA track success in 2026, he turned professional.^{13;19} A model that simply drags last year's results forward would leave the single most valuable men's individual result attached to New Mexico. XC-SPI removes it. The athlete left; the historical result remains evidence about him, not a permanent school asset.

And yet New Mexico remains second in the preseason model. Samuel's victory can dominate the memory of the race, but the team behind him was not a one-man construction. Collins Kiprotich, Evans Kiplagat, and Vincent Chirchir all finished in the top 20. The Lobos scored 82 points, the lowest men's NCAA total in program history, while the women finished fourth. New Mexico was the only Division I program to place both teams on the NCAA podium.⁵

The 2026 question is therefore not whether Samuel can be replaced by another Samuel. It is whether a roster that became much deeper than its star can absorb the loss without losing its identity as a title team.

4. Iowa State's Third Place Was Messier Than the Final Score

Iowa State is the preseason No. 1, which is likely to be the most argued-about placement in the ranking. The easy explanation is roster arithmetic: the Cyclones were third with 158 points, return a large part of the scoring core, and add Justine Kipkoech. The audited Week 0 calculation can reach five NCAA-proven values without inserting a generic replacement value into the scoring five.^{1;12;14}

The actual 2025 race was less clean. Iowa State had four All-Americans: Robin Kwemai Bera, Meshack Kimutai, Rodgers Kiplimo, and Joash Ruto. It also reported that three different athletes fell. Sanele Masondo dropped nearly 150 places between the 3K and 4K marks before recovering more than 75 positions.⁴ The Cyclones still earned their third consecutive top-five NCAA finish.

A fall counts. The points are not erased because the race was messy. But championship evidence is both outcome and circumstance. When the question shifts from what happened to what the same athletes might do later, the shape of that outcome matters.

Iowa State did not secretly beat Oklahoma State in 2025. It left with a third-place trophy after a race in which several runners kept competing after their planned races had already been disrupted. The preseason No. 1 is a different claim: continuity, proven scoring depth, and another NCAA-level addition make Iowa State's current five-man structure less fragile than the alternatives. September will test whether that is true.

5. The Men's Field Has Stories the 2025 Team Order Cannot Show

The top four are not the entire men's season. Alabama sits third in the audited preseason ranking because its current distance roster preserves a strong cluster of NCAA-level evidence. It is a quieter case than Oklahoma State or New Mexico – less dramatic turnover, more continuity – and therefore easy to overlook in a narrative built only around the 2025 podium.

Louisville is the opposite. The Cardinals were 26th with 584 points. Nickson Kogei, 18th overall at the NCAA Championship as an individual qualifier for Cincinnati, is now at Louisville with Elsingi Kipruto and Geoffrey Kirwa.^{1;12;17} Kipruto's 2026 outdoor track results make the front end more interesting still.¹⁹

That makes Louisville one of the cleanest tests of the entire project. If the Cardinals become a genuine top-10 team, a model anchored too tightly to last year's school finish will be slow to see it. If three stars are not supported by adequate fourth and fifth runners, a star-focused model will overrate them. Either outcome teaches something.

6. NC State's Championship Was a Return, Not a Continuation

NC State's dominance over the last half-decade can make every championship look inevitable in retrospect. The 2025 title was not. The Wolfpack had won three consecutive titles from 2021 through 2023, then finished eighth in 2024 as BYU won the championship. One year later, NC State returned to Gans Creek against the defending champion and one of the most anticipated freshmen in recent NCAA distance running.

The morning was rainy and muddy. NC State did not have the individual champion or runner-up. It had the scoring pattern team cross country rewards: Hannah Gapes fifth, Grace Hartman sixth, and five athletes high enough that the entire scoring group earned All-America honors.^{6;7} The final margin over BYU was 16 points, 114 to 130. NC State's average team time was separated from BYU's by almost nothing, yet the placement distribution gave the Wolfpack its fourth championship in five years.⁶

That is why the 2026 preseason case feels different from the men's. NC State's championship result and roster story point in the same direction. The core returns and Rachel Forsyth arrives with NCAA-level experience.^{12;15} There is no need to manufacture drama around the No. 1 ranking. The interesting question is the simplest one in the sport: what has to go wrong for someone else to beat them?

7. BYU Got Better and Still Lost

BYU produced one of the crueller facts in championship sports. The Cougars scored 147 points to win the 2024 national title. In 2025 they scored 130 – 17 points better – and finished second.⁸

They also had Jane Hedengren. Her freshman season looked almost mythic before the NCAA final began. She broke the Gans Creek course record in her collegiate debut at Pre-Nationals, won the Big 12 title by more than 40 seconds, won the Mountain Regional by more than 40 seconds, and had not lost a collegiate cross country race.^{9;10}

At NAAs, Hedengren did not hide. She led through 2K and stayed with Lemngole through 5K. Her 18:38.9 runner-up time would itself have broken the previous NCAA championship record.⁸ It was not enough. Lemngole, already the defending champion and an athlete with international experience, separated late and won in 18:25.4.^{1;8}

There may not be a better reminder that improvement and victory are not the same thing. BYU scored better and lost the team title. Hedengren ran faster than any previous NCAA runner on the championship course standard and lost the individual race. That gives the 2026 Cougars two connected motivations: a team that was objectively better by score but no longer champion, and an individual runner who now knows precisely where the standard at the top is.

8. Lemngole's Win and Alabama's 16th Place Tell Two Stories at Once

If the defining image of the women's race belonged to Lemngole pulling away from Hedengren, the team table told a much stranger story. Lemngole won. Caren Kiplagat finished 11th. Cynthia Jemutai was 19th. Alabama's first three scoring positions accounted for only 29 team points.¹

Alabama still finished 16th because the fourth and fifth positions were extraordinarily expensive. There may be no cleaner explanation of why cross country is both an individual and team sport. Lemngole could be perfect and Alabama could still be nowhere near the podium.

That does not diminish the title. It makes Alabama's 2026 team ceiling more interesting. The program already knows it can place championship-caliber runners at the front. The question is whether the back of the scoring five can become ordinary enough that the extraordinary athletes actually matter in the team standings. XC-SPI has Alabama seventh in the women's preseason ranking – substantially above 16th, but still far enough behind NC State for the reason to remain visible.

9. Iowa State Women Did Not Finish 20th Because They Lacked National-Class Runners

Iowa State's women's result is another place where the team number hides the shape of the race. Betty Kipkore finished 15th and Mercy Kibet 20th, both earning All-America honors. The score then opened sharply behind them, and Iowa State finished 20th with 491 points.^{1;11}

The Cyclones' own post-race account did not treat the result as a collapse. The program had not qualified a team in 2024. Coach Cale Wallace described the 2025 finish as a major step forward despite missing pieces and an off day.¹¹ That context matters. A team can be 20th nationally and still be in the middle of becoming something better.

Rosemary Longisa now arrives with proven NCAA cross country evidence, and Mercyline Kirwa brings enormous 2026 track upside.^{12;14;19} None of that erases 491 points. It changes which part of those 491 points the preseason model expects to persist.

XC-SPI puts Iowa State third in the women's preseason ranking, the most dramatic move near the front of either Top 25. If the Cyclones stay there once actual cross country evidence arrives, it will support athlete-level roster reconstruction. If they fall back toward the middle of the field, it will indicate that the model gave too much credit to projected depth and track evidence. Publishing the claim before the answer is known is part of the point.

10. New Mexico Quietly Had the Broadest Championship Morning

Samuel's individual title can make New Mexico's 2025 meet feel like a men's story. It was not. The men finished second and the women fourth. New Mexico was the only Division I program to put both teams on the trophy podium, and the men's score fell from 272 points in 2024 to 82 in 2025.⁵

That is a program-level transformation, not one champion. Samuel's move to the professional ranks changes the men's ceiling, but the reason New Mexico remains second in the men's XC-SPI and fourth in the women's ranking is that the roster evidence is deeper than the headline athlete.¹³

There are many ways to remember the Lobos only for the person who is no longer there. The 2026 season will test whether that memory is too narrow.

11. The Men's Individual Title Now Belongs to the Runners Who Chased Samuel

Samuel leaving does not create an empty race. It creates a different one. Rocky Hansen begins as the clearest favorite because he was second in 2025 and remains one of the best returning cross country athletes in the country.^{1;18} In the championship race he was the only runner who made Samuel's late move briefly contestable.

Behind Hansen are athletes who already know the front of an NCAA Championship. Solomon Kipchoge was third, Brian Musau fourth, and Denis Kipngetich sixth.¹ Their team contexts differ, but the individual problem is the same: there is no longer a two-time runner-up-turned-champion occupying the obvious favorite position.

A second group includes runners whose 2026 track results widen the conversation. Elsingi Kipruto's outdoor performances make his 39th-place 2025 cross country finish a weak description of his current ceiling. Dismus Lokira, Robin Kwemai Bera, and Evans Kurui each have enough national-level evidence to make a further jump plausible.^{1;19}

For Week 0, XC-SPI keeps the title watch in tiers rather than publishing unsupported percentages. Hansen is the favorite. Kipchoge, Musau, and Kipngetich are primary contenders. The next group has to earn its way upward on the grass.

12. The Women's Individual Title Is the Rematch Everyone Wants

The women's race is less complicated at the top. Doris Lemngole is the defending champion. Jane Hedengren was the undefeated freshman sensation until Lemngole beat her head-to-head at NCAAs. They are the two names that make the 2026 title race immediately legible.

A rematch is not a rerun. Hedengren now owns a year of collegiate championship experience and continued to produce national-level track results. Lemngole, however, did not win because her rival simply had a bad day. She ran 18:25.4, defended her title, and produced the decisive move when the championship finally became a two-person race.^{1;8}

Riley Chamberlain, Hannah Gapes, Grace Hartman, and Isca Chelangat form an unusually strong second line. Betty Kipkore, Pamela Kosgei, and Mercyline Kirwa add different combinations of cross country evidence and 2026 track form.^{1;19}

The temptation is to turn those names into preseason title percentages. The model will not do so until its historical probability calibration passes. The honest Week 0 output is a contender tier, not a decimal dressed up as certainty.

13. What September Can Actually Tell Us

The first weekend of college cross country rarely deserves the certainty people try to extract from it. Stars sit. Teams race controlled efforts. Coaches split rosters. A program may have no reason to show the seven athletes it hopes to race in November. A runner missing one September meet is not evidence of injury without reliable information saying so.

Week 1 therefore does not need to identify the NCAA champion. It can answer narrower questions. Who does Oklahoma State trust behind Musau, Kipngetich, and Guadie? Does Iowa State's men's depth look as strong in an actual field as it does on the roster sheet? How does New Mexico begin to define life after Samuel? Can Louisville put fourth and fifth runners close enough to its stars to justify the preseason jump? Does Iowa State's reconstructed women's lineup look like a coherent cross country team? Does NC State's continuity make the defending champion look boring in the best possible way?

Individually, the first weeks can tell us whether Hansen accepts the favorite role, whether Lemngole and Hedengren remain on a collision course, and which athlete not yet prominent in the preseason discussion forces a place in it.

Week 1 can be quiet. Cross country does not have to manufacture urgency in August.

14. What the Model Is Supposed to Do – and What It Should Never Replace

The purpose of XC-SPI is not to remove the human part of the sport. The human stories are the reason the bookkeeping needs to be careful.

Oklahoma State's 57 points mean something because they were redemption after a poor championship. Samuel's 2025 win means something because he had been second twice. Hedengren's runner-up finish means something because she had spent the fall unbeaten. NC State's championship means something because eighth place came before it. Iowa State's third means something different once three falls are part of the record. Alabama's 16th means something different once the national champion is standing inside that team result.

A useful model should not flatten those stories into decimals. It should stop the analyst from telling the wrong story because a familiar school name, a flashy transfer, or a fast raw time made the shortcut too tempting. The statistics answer a narrow question: given the athletes actually on these rosters, the evidence they have actually produced, and the uncertainty that actually remains, what should be believed right now?

Then the season gets to prove the answer wrong.

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