

Restless Bulldogs coming of age

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MAHOMET — Call them the Baby Bulldogs.

There's not a single senior among their swiftest seven. Their top two runners, Scott DeWitt and Grant Iles, are just sophomores. Their No. 4 guy, Phillip Alexander, didn't even pick up the sport until last year.

Seems like an unlikely Mahomet-Beymour boys' cross-country edition to be making the school's first state meet appearance in this decade.

"Not really," Bulldogs 25th-year coach John King said. "As a very young team last year, they just barely missed qualifying for state. With a year of maturation, I thought we could get there this season."

It's been a season of good timing in Mahomet. DeWitt, Iles and others have posted consistently fast 3-mile clockings. Many days, only 35 sec-

onds separated the first M-S finisher from the sixth. And the Bulldogs, fresh off impressive regional and sectional performances, are surging at just the right time.

"We just keep getting better and better," King said.

Depth's been the difference.

"Whenever me and Scott have a bad day," Iles said, "the three and four guys run just as well as we could have."

It happened as recently as Oct. 22 at the Kickapoo State Park Regional. DeWitt and Iles were off the mark. So junior Josh Smith, normally the Bulldogs' No. 3 runner, stepped to the forefront. He finished first on the team, fourth overall.

Alexander, usually No. 4 on the team, was second this time, eighth overall.

"We have a lot of talent," DeWitt said. "We all run about the same."

It's a quality that's been missing

in Mahomet in recent years.

"In the past, we've always had a team where the pecking order was so strong, if one guy had a bad day, the whole team had a bad day," King said.

Bad days have come few and far between for the Bulldogs this season. Each meet, they typically place four or five runners around the 16-minute mark.

"That's when you really start to do some damage," King said.

Now, it's time to find out how the Bulldogs play in Peoria.

The Class A state boys' race, with a 20-team field that includes defending champion Normal University High, begins at 10:30 a.m. Saturday.

All of Saturday's state finals will be held at Peoria's Detweiler Park. The Class A girls' event starts at 9:30 a.m. Class AA races begin at 11:30 a.m. for girls and 12:45 p.m. for boys. Awards ceremonies start

at 1:45 p.m.

The Bulldogs have set their sights on a top-10 finish. A top-five effort is not out of the question, but M-S prefers to keep its goals modest for now.

After all, they've never been here before. King has, but with none of his current runners.

The atmosphere, King said, can be intimidating. There is a lot of noise, a lot of pressure. Hundreds of screaming parents, coaches and fans wait on either side of the finish gate.

It's like nothing the Bulldogs have seen before, like nothing they'll see again.

"It's almost like running a gauntlet," King said.

King's words don't seem to frighten his runners one bit.

"I don't feel intimidated," DeWitt said. "We have nothing to prove to anybody."

Said Iles: "It doesn't scare me."