

Keeble, depth help Mahomet three-peat



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Champion Alex Keeble leads the Mahomet-Seymour cross country team to victory in Peoria Class 2A Sectional on Saturday. The junior covered the 3-mile course in 15 minutes and 1 second.

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EAST PEORIA — Cross country is not known as a sport where teams can often afford to have substitutes give first-stringers rest during the state series.

No. 2-state ranked Mahomet-Seymour High School, however, has been manipulating its lineup to triumphant effect, the latest example coming in Saturday's East Peoria Class 2A Sectional where the Bulldogs won with 62 points.

The score included a one-point contribution from individual champion Alex Keeble, who toured the 3-mile course in 15 minutes, 1 second.

"In football and basketball, they sub people all the time," said Bulldog coach Neal Garrison, who brought in three runners who sat out the team's regional title run.

"It kind of makes sense — when they are tired, rest them. Most people just don't have the luxury in cross country."

Mahomet-Seymour's third consecutive sectional title and fourth in school history advanced it to next Saturday's state meet at Peoria's Detweiller Park along with No. 16-ranked University High in second (91).

For the girls, area qualifiers included third-place U High (137) and three individuals: Mahomet-Seymour's Lauren Whitehouse (3rd, 18:05) and Normal West's Sara Piller (11th, 18:39) and Andrea Gordon (18th, 18:53).

While the five qualifying boys teams celebrated, Normal West endured its second consecutive

sixth-place sectional showing, a mere seven points behind fifth-place Peoria Notre Dame (181). That was the same margin by which the seventh-place Wildcat girls (150) failed to advance.

The heartbreak extended to the individual level for Normal West, which saw Alex Hillegass miss the final qualifying berth by one place and four seconds. Last year, he missed by one place and seven seconds.

The winning formula for Mahomet-Seymour involved five runners finishing within 62 seconds of each other. After Keeble came William Wolf (4th, 15:12), Jake Hyde (14th, 15:42), Andrew Walmer (19th, 15:47) and Riley Fortune (27th, 16:03).

Garrison said they are more than fast.

"They are super nice guys," he said. "They care a lot about their teammates, which makes them run harder in practice and in the summer. I'm very fortunate."

Keeble's sixth win in eight races made him the second sectional champion in Mahomet-Seymour history behind Dan Nielsen (1990).

"I'm feeling a lot better than last week," said Keeble, still on antibiotics for a throat infection.

He ran 14:51 here five weeks ago when it was warmer and less windy. He spent most of Saturday far in front until U High runner-up Alexander Bruno came within four seconds at the finish.

"I like (running alone) because it kind of gives me a mental boost," Keeble said. "I don't like (running alone) because when there are people up there, they are pulling me to a good time."

U High's eighth straight state berth was aided by Eli Hill (7th, 15:26), Jack Franklin (12th, 15:38), Andrew Walch (31st, 16:08) and Jared Schuckman (44th, 16:16).

"I couldn't be more happy with the way this group is rounding into shape," said Pioneer coach Lester Hampton, who watched Bruno pass a handful of foes on the final downhill half mile.

"That's my favorite part of this course," Bruno said.

A notable non-qualifier was Bloomington's Austin Bicknell (24th, 16:02), who was first among freshmen.

The No. 10 U High girls set a program record by qualifying for the fifth straight year. Only No. 2 Dunlap (83) and No. 8 Peoria Notre Dame (88) were better. Notre Dame junior Maryjeanne Gilbert won by 65 seconds in 16:41.

Pioneer scorers were Shannan Supan (7th, 18:29), Madigan Landess (17th, 18:53), Advika Kamatar (32nd, 19:34), Riley Madix (39th, 19:42) and Ally Shepherd (47th, 19:57).

"I think it's a group that can crack the top 10 (at state), but we've got to run better than we ran today," said Pioneer coach John Neisler. "We're just happy to be there."

No. 16 Mahomet-Seymour slipped to ninth (193), but did advance Whitehouse, who ran near Dunlap runner-up Abby Jockisch (17:46) much of the way.

"When she got away, (my strategy) was just watch her and hope she'll pull you along," Whitehouse said. "That's the way it ended up going, too."

Seniors Piller and Gordon each earned a third state trip while pushing the number of individual qualifiers in Normal West history to four.

"I wanted to be in the top 10, but I'm still pretty happy because the course is really hard," Piller said. "The hills are long and gradual."

West coach Steve Destri said, "Andrea has really come on the second half of the season. You always hope seniors will finish off their careers (at state)."
