

READY. SET. GO.

Spotlighting three area programs before Saturday's sectionals

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MAHOMET — The difference between Normal U-High and Mahomet-Seymour was clear to see, even if one boys' team was hardly better than the other at last Saturday's Class 2A Metamora Regional.

M-S unmistakably had the advantage as far as top-end runners go, with Mathias Powell, Ryan Hodge and Riley Fortune taking first, second, and fourth, respectively. But, Normal U-High's No. 2 through No. 5 runners finished all within 15 seconds of each other. The Bulldogs' No. 4 finisher wasn't far behind, either.

"Their strengths are kind of the opposite of ours," M-S coach Neal Garrison said. "They've kind of got a nice pack in the middle, and we have a top three that they can compete with. And then our next couple were fighting it out with their main pack. So if we can tighten our second pack closer to theirs, we'll be tough to beat. If not, they'll be tough to beat."

The teams wound up tied with 49 points, but Normal U-High won on the tiebreaker of the sixth runner.

That's the difference between the team M-S has this season and the one that won a 2A state championship last year. The Bulldogs had six All-State runners a year ago, with the seventh finishing just three seconds away from the honor. They packed tightly every meet and all seven were capable of running in the 15-minute range.

This year, the depth is different. The Bulldogs have two packs out of their top seven runners, meaning none can afford an off race without skew-

ing the final score.

"We kind of have two major packs," Garrison said. "In some way that's been more challenging because I think they kind of compare themselves to last year when they had a big pack.

"But time-wise, it seems different. If one guy was bad last time, it didn't matter because it was a pack, and they fed off of each other. They can't afford not to help out their smaller pack because there's not that many of them."

Garrison thinks Powell, Hodge and Fortune all have the capability of finishing in the top 10 at the state meet in two weeks. Bryson Keeble, the Bulldogs' No. 4 runner, will also make his team better after sitting out the regional meet.

This week, the Bulldogs hope to top the Pioneers at the 2A sectional. U-High will host at Normal's Maxwell Park. But the competition for the main prize will still be a week away.

"The main thing is to stay healthy and injury-free so we can compete the week after," Garrison said about the upcoming state meet on Nov. 4 at Detweiller Park in Peoria. "I think both (M-S and Normal U-High) could potentially be in the top three at state, so it's good to be in that mix. We're happy about that."

SJ-O peaking at right time

At times this season, the potential of St. Joseph-Ogden was difficult to judge.

Difficulties started right away, with No. 1 runner Wyatt Wolfersberger tweaking the iliotibial band on his knee early in the year. Various injuries and inconsistency continued.

Yet, led by Wolfersberger's return to the top

of the lineup, the Spartans won the Class 1A St. Thomas More Regional last Saturday.

SJ-O coach Jason Retz is optimistic about his team's possibilities going into this Saturday's sectional meet that will take place at the Macoupin County Fairgrounds in Carlinville.

"It's exciting to have him feeling good and racing again, getting through the aches and pains," Retz said. "He's done a really good job of staying focused through a little bit of injury this year and taking over that No. 1 spot. I don't know that he ever really gave it up, but it can be difficult when you're not running to assume that position, and he's done a good job through it."

Of course, the rest of the Spartans weren't far behind. Wolfersberger, who won the regional in a time of 16 minutes, 16 seconds. Isiah McCune, who Retz said has been the Spartans' steadiest runner this season, finished third in 16:31. Senior Braden Pridemore finished sixth in 16:48 while classmate Riley Baker, who ran cross-country for the first time this season, took ninth in 16:59. Freshman Brandon Mattsey rounded out the scoring by taking 20th in 17:33.

The Spartans have accomplished this without senior Austin Rein, who hurt his knee and is out for the season.

"We're kind of hitting on all cylinders like we should at the end of the year, so that's exciting for us," Retz said. "Losing (Rein), I didn't think we'd be in the position we're in. It's kind of been a surprise, but Brandon stepping up and Riley stepping up, it's been a huge help for us."

Vikings overcome injuries

Danville coach Todd Orvis was trying to be realistic heading into the Class 2A Charleston Regional.

Without three of the Vikings' top-five runners, he realized taking home a team title last Saturday would be a long shot.

"On paper, we thought we had a shot to win," Orvis said, "but it wasn't really realistic I didn't think."

Led by what Orvis called Brandon Barfell's best race of the season, the Vikings won the meet by 10 points.

Danville also received an unexpected contribution from junior Lenox Li, who finished fifth on the team after only running a few varsity races all season.

Orvis is hopeful that his top-two runners — Michael Moreman and Sincere Williams-Davis, who likely would have been in the mix to win individual regional titles if they were healthy — will run this weekend after injuries slowed them.

Heading into Saturday's Class 2A Decatur MacArthur Sectional at Hickory Point Golf Course, Orvis has had to adjust his expectations after hoping for a top-five finish and possibly a sectional title earlier in the season.

"The primary goal is getting out of the sectional," Orvis said. "You're reaching five days without (Moreman and Williams-Davis) running, and sooner or later that's going to catch up to you. We're hoping for the best out of those two guys. I think thinking that they'll step in and be as good as they were will be unlikely, but without them, we don't have a chance to get out of the sectional."