

STATE: 'I was pumped up'

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"I was like, 'Oh my gosh, we have state champions in the same district as us,'" Bachert said. "I was so amazed. It was so cool ... I didn't imagine I would be on varsity. I was hoping I could be an alternate so I could still come."

But as she rounded one of the races' final turns and urged her older teammate on, the fact that she'd arrived at a higher level than she'd ever dreamed sunk in.

"I was pumped up," she said. "Of course I was tired, but I was ready to compete."

Harmon may have finished a few spots shy of her freshman and sophomore year performances, but given the circumstances, her ability to simply run the race turned the tide toward Unity.

"Jordan was a huge wild card," Leaman said. "We didn't know what she was going to put forth today ... Honestly the only thing I could do the whole time was pray. I just didn't know what else to do, because I was worried about her."

In the end, she finished exactly where she needed to finish, just like the rest of her teammates, although it took them awhile to figure out

"It's crazy," Leaman said. "This was so close, and I couldn't be more proud of the girls as a team today."

Bulldogs cool under pressure

Mahomet-Seymour coach Neal Garrison doesn't believe in heaping needless pressure onto his athletes.

But as he counted runners at the two-mile mark of Saturday's Class 2A boys' state cross country meet, desperation set in as the Bull-

dogs' chances of winning their second straight state seemingly slipped away. As his fourth and fifth runners, Bryson Keeble and Evan Burge, passed him by, he made the stakes clear.

"I said, 'We've got to get 20 more guys each,'" Garrison said. "I felt bad because I'm trying not to put pressure on them, but it's do or die in that moment."

They did enough and then some. After Mathias Powell (fourth overall, 14:45), Riley Fortune (sixth overall, 14:48) and Ryan Hodge (ninth overall, 15:02), put up low numbers, Keeble took 45th and Burge finished 71st to give the Bulldogs another Class 2A state title in comfortable fashion.

A year ago, the Bulldogs' state championship was never in doubt, practically from the first day of the season. Mahomet-Seymour had seven runners who came into the state meet with times of 15:03 or better and won by 76 points with a group that could finish in virtually any order.

This year, the Bulldogs' spread was larger, meaning each athlete was virtually irreplaceable. In a way, the uncertainty made this year's state title sweeter.

"It felt like a formality last year," Powell said. "It didn't feel like a formality this year ... It's been a really up-and-down season, and we've gone back and forth on how the team's been doing, but we were ready to race today. So I was just really really happy after the race today. It was nice to know that we had actually pulled it off."

Mahomet-Seymour didn't even win its regional two weekends ago, losing to Normal University on a tie-breaker. The Bull-

dogs, though, entered Saturday's race with confidence.

"When regionals rolled around, we knew that we didn't run as well as we wanted to, and sectionals we ran better," Fortune said. "We were really confident today knowing that we had so much left in us ... It was big to know that there were other teams (in the mix), so we knew we were going to have competition. I feel like U-High had a really good chance."

The singular state championship was reward enough, but to Garrison, that wasn't the most special part of Saturday's win. As the Bulldogs found out they won another title, they were surrounded by a horde of parents along with several alumni, who were among the former runners who wrote letters to the team throughout the year with words of encouragement.

This wasn't simply a state title. It was an affirmation that the Bulldogs, who have won their first four state trophies over the last four years, aren't simply the best team in the state. They're a top-tier program, year-in and year-out.

"Any time it happens once, it's just sort of a dream come true, but the second time just solidifies how hard these parents have worked, how the alumni built a program more than just building a one-hit wonder," Garrison said. "You'll see a lot of programs that have a few good guys and when they're gone, it just falls apart, but these guys have done a good job mentoring the younger guys. It's been a good experience to be a part of the community these guys have built. I'm definitely fortunate to be a part of this."