**Mahomet tips U High in latest battle of state powers**

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NORMAL — In most sports, when the top two ranked teams meet in the postseason, one is eliminated.

Cross country, however, is treating fans to three consecutive Saturday showdowns between the No. 1-ranked University High School boys and No. 2 Mahomet-Seymour.

Round one in last week's regionals went to the Pioneers on the sixth-man tiebreaker. Round two on Saturday in the Class 2A U High Sectional at wind-chilled Maxwell Park went to Mahomet-Seymour, 41-65, as Bulldogs Mathias Powell, Ryan Hodge and Riley Fortune swept the top three places.

Round three will be for the state championship next Saturday at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

"I think you've got to take your hat off to Mahomet," said U High coach Lester Hampton. "They were phenomenal. Nobody was going to beat them today.

"The good thing is there's one more week. So we'll try to get primed a little bit better and see what happens next weekend."

Also qualifying were third-place Bloomington (91) and fourth-place Normal West (109).

Lincoln senior Blake Jones was among the seven individual qualifiers, placing 11th on the 3-mile course in 15 minutes, 40 seconds.

In the girls race, the lone Pantagraph area qualifier was U High runner-up Lyndsey Wolters in 17:52.

The Pioneer boys, who rested No. 3 man Liam Vaughn because of a hip issue, saw Jared Schuckman mix it up with Mahomet-Seymour's trio until the Bulldogs pulled away the final 200 meters with Mathias winning in 15:04, three seconds ahead of Hodge, who was three seconds ahead of Fortune. Schuckman took fourth in 15:14.

"It's a fun challenge," said Schuckman of the repeated battles between state powers. "It's a little pre-state every weekend."

Rock Island Alleman's Spencer Smith led the first two miles while Schuckman paced the chasers, passing one mile in 5:06 and two in 10:10.

"In the last quarter, I made my move and got out in front of them," Schuckman said. "My form was a little off and they got me at the end."

U High had five men finish within 59 seconds of each other compared to the Bulldogs' 55 seconds. Matt Zacharias (6th, 15:37) and Jackson McClure (12th, 15:54) also broke 16:00.

No. 8-state ranked BHS qualified for the first time since 2011 and No. 12 Normal West for the first time since 2010.

"We've got a lot of depth this year," said Purple Raider coach John Szabo, who put five men in the top 34 led by Austin Bicknell (8th, 15:39) and Nick Doud (10th, 15:40). "Austin had a terrific race."

Roger Mendiola, slowed recently by an abdominal injury, managed 23rd (16:08) as Bloomington's third man.

"Every week they seem to get a little bit better," said Szabo, who has committed to shave his trademark mustache if BHS cracks the state's top 10.

Normal West was led by the meet's first sophomore, ninth-placer Charlie Wetzel (15:39). Teammate Tyler Dunn was 12th (15:40).

"I definitely don't think just making it (to state) is good enough," said elated Wildcat coach Chad Aubin looking ahead. "We want to push and just see how high we can place."

Lincoln's Jones also has high hopes for the state meet where he'd like to land one of the 25 medals at stake.

"That's been the goal all year," he said. "Breaking 15:00 has also been a goal."

For the girls, things didn't pan out for No. 5-ranked U High, which finished seventh with 209 points, 41 away from advancing. Normal West was eighth (211) as Mara Smith (23rd, 18:41) came within seven seconds of qualifying.

"We're a top-five team when we've got everybody healthy," said U High coach John Neisler, whose team ran without Riley Madix (strep throat) and didn't have Tasha Schuckman (knee) at full strength. "Those things happen in sports."

Wolters beat everyone except fellow freshman Campbell Petersen (17:19) of No. 1-ranked Dunlap, which scored 46 points to top runner-up Mahomet-Seymour by 80.

"I really like running in the cold because it helps my asthma," said Wolters, who has state medal hopes.