


Sports

Powell wins IHSA Class 2A State Title



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One race. One day. Four firsts.

Mahomet-Seymour's Mathias Powell capped a perfect postseason on Saturday by winning the Class 2A cross-country individual state championship at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

— He was the first M-S state titlist in cross-country;

— His 3-mile time of 14 minutes, 31.77 seconds was a school record;

— By virtue of his first-place performance, Powell became the Bulldogs' first three-time All-Stater in cross-country.

In his senior season, Powell competed in nine meets. He was the winner in eight and never lost to another opponent in Class 2A.

His winning margin at state was 16.19 seconds, the largest gap between first and second in Class 2A since 2007.

"He had a champion mindset," M-S coach Neal Garrison said, "to do what he can, not just to be competitive, but also to be the best of the best."

Powell was in the lead pack of four runners at the mile marker and then made his move.

"Between a mile and a mile and a half, I started to separate myself," he said.

As he hit the 2-mile mark, Powell began to realize what was attainable.

"I saw the clock and knew I had a chance to PR," he said. "I hammered it the last mile and tried to widen the gap."

He was joined in the race by one teammate (senior Bryson Keeble was 95th in a season-best 16:07), but had the support of his other teammates and the girls' squad on the side.

Powell heard their voices, but decided not to trust what they were saying about how closely he was being pursued.

"If you happen to be in the lead, it's always hard to tell where everyone else is," Powell said.

"My teammates were shouting out. I heard 10 meters to 100 meters and almost everything in-between. I decided not to believe anyone and go as

hard as I could.”

What resulted was his personal-best time by almost 13 seconds and the 13th-fastest time ever recorded in 2A since the state split into three classes for the sport. He averaged a 4:50 split per mile.

“Once he broke away, they couldn’t catch him,” Garrison said.

The individual state champion is the same person who wasn’t sure he was cut out for cross-country.

“I almost quit after freshman year,” Powell said. “I was coming off junior high (and a top 10 finish as an eighth-grader) and was pretty naive.

“I was thinking I could walk in and be on varsity. I wasn’t prepared for how difficult it would be. I had a rough season.”

Joining the cross-country program was a tough decision in the first place.

“I’d played soccer since fourth grade,” Powell said. “It was a close call. I almost did soccer.”

Powell’s brother (Jackson) was a three-year Bulldog cross-country runner, joining the long-distance crew after a freshman season in soccer.

Mathias Powell’s cross-country teammates saw the potential and provided encouragement.

“The guys convinced me to stay,” he said.

There were never any more thoughts about a return to soccer.

“My next year went so well,” Mathias Powell said.

He was 18th in state as a sophomore and moved up to fourth as a junior

when — significantly — he was the top underclassman finisher in Class 2A.

Powell knew he was the marked runner all season.

“It was pretty intimidating,” he said. “Pretty much every week, people were keying off of me.

“That involves more mind games, but Coach was super-helpful and helped me keep my head on straight and focused on running my race.”

Garrison was not surprised by his state champion’s performance.

“By all means, I knew he had a chance to win it,” Garrison said, “but there’s so much that can go wrong with sickness or injury.”

The coach’s confidence was based on what he saw in Powell.

“He has a special skill,” Garrison said. “He is very strategic in how he races.

“He gets the most out of himself and doesn’t get rattled. He know how to control the pace. He had the confidence and the stamina to do it.”

There were on-line indicators all season of where his standout stood.

“With the technology, they do speed ratings and Mathias had the No. 1 time (in the state) from early in the season,” Garrison said. “He handled the pressure well.”

After running on M-S teams that won back-to-back cross-country state titles his sophomore and junior seasons, Powell wasn’t sure his individual title would be his most memorable moment.

“There’s not anything that can match-winning as a team,” he said. “You

share that with so many people.

“But there’s no way I’d have done this without every single person on the team. The entire team showed up (Saturday) and did warmups with us.

“I’m glad there were a lot of people here to celebrate with. This year’s team was so much fun to be around. I was a spoiled high school runner to be around these incredible groups.”

M-S’ school-record 3-mile time had stood for 41 years after Mark Johnson was timed in 14:41 in 1974, but has now been bettered twice in four years.

Mathias Powell lowered a standard set by Alex Keeble (14:36) in 2015.

In dominating the IHSA postseason series, Powell won his regional title by 30 seconds and his sectional crown by 12 seconds.

Powell comes from a strong running background. His father (Britt Powell) set the school record for the 1,600 meters at Centennial in 1983 (4:22.8) and it stood for 20 years.

His time still ranks second on Centennial’s all-time leaders’ list.

Mathias Powell won’t be slowing down any time soon. His training will continue.

The Villanova University recruit will get a run in on Sunday.

“Just a recovery run,” he said.

Powell plans to return to action next Saturday in the Nike Regional, in Terre Haute, Ind.

It’s an elite multi-state meet where the top five individuals secure a berth in the Nike Nationals in late November.

Garrison believes the M-S program will remain strong in the foreseeable future.

At sectionals last week, three freshmen and one sophomore were in the lineup.

"Ten of our 17 guys were freshmen," Garrison said. "This freshmen group is one of the hardest-working groups I've had in a while.

"I believe they can be one of our strongest teams in two years."

M-S was a near-miss for advancing to state, finishing sixth as a team at sectionals. The top five teams qualified.

"If you're successful too young, that doesn't necessarily help you long-term," Garrison said. "The year we got second (2015), our guys were so frustrated they left no stone unturned and went to a whole new level.

"Barely falling short this year is probably one of the greatest motivators ever."