

County's cross-country fare at Hereford is priceless

by Joshua Cooley
Staff Writer

As one of her three sisters gleefully bobbed around her snapping photographs, Ashley St. Denis reflected on the biggest race of her life, which had ended just minutes before she had stepped out of the Hereford and Still panting from winning the Class 3A state cross-country title, the Walter Johnson High sophomore spoke of her emotions, her performance and her red hair. Well, it was actually auburn. No, more like fiery strawberry.

"My hair was getting long, so I got it cut," she said. "The rest of my sisters are redheads, so I thought, 'Hey, why not make a change? I might even shock a few people.'"

St. Denis certainly did, and so did a large local contingent, whose various accomplishments throughout the day turned the Maryland state cross-country championships at Hereford High in Parkton Saturday into a Montgomery County all-star show.

Here's how the drama unfolded

chronologically, starting with Saturday morning's first race, the 3A boys championship.

Class 3A boys

For three years, Beth Muehl has encouraged, yelled, instructed and prodded her teams at Northwest in tireless fashion. For one of the sport's hardest-working coaches, her labors finally paid off in a state championship, as the Northwest boys scored 101 points to beat Du-laney by two and Mt. Hebron by seven in a riveting race.

Talking about her team well after they had finished, Muehl couldn't stop giggling with each new thought.

"I'm going to cry if I don't," she said. "Cross country just means so much to me. It's the thing that changed my life in high school. My best friends in high school ran cross country. My cross-country coach Tim Cook of Chambersburg High

in Pennsylvania] was one of the most influential people in my life. He's one of the first people I'm going to call tonight."

With the win, Northwest posted the four-year-old school's first team state championship in any sport. The victory also capped a remarkable fall season for the Jaguars, who swept county, regional and state titles despite being reclassified from the 2A into the tougher 3A this year.

"They came into the season with several goals — being undefeated in the division, being in the top three of the county, being in the top three at states," Muehl said. "When they kept coming together, we had to keep reevaluating the goals. It was really nice."

None of the Jaguars finished in the top 10, but it was their pack-running that made the difference. Junior Kelly Crisler finished 13th (17:07.7) to lead the team, followed by junior Tom Rathbone (19th), freshman Matt Logie (20th), junior Matt Walenciak (28th) and junior Kevin Lebickier (31st).

Class 4A boys

It was a banner day for county

4A boys teams, as all six that came to Hereford finished in the top 10. Gaithersburg, which received little attention this season after winning its first state championship since 1971 last fall, led all county teams with a second-place showing (95 points). It was the Trojans' fifth straight top-three finish in the 4A state meet. Powerful C. Milton Wright won with 20 points, the lowest winning total since Beall scored 18 for the Class C win in 1974.

Churchill (third place, 140 points) and Magruder (fourth, 143) also excelled, but it was Blair's team that created the biggest shock wave. Traditionally one of the weaker teams in the county, the Blazers took seventh (196 points) behind the strong duo of seniors Ethan Halper-Stromberg and Jossi Fritz-Mauer, who finished 11th and 18th respectively. Blair finished ninth in the county and fifth in the 4A West Region earlier this fall.

"We feel really good about it," Fritz-Mauer said. "Our No. 1 goal this year was to get respect. Historically, Blair finishes last in the region. We don't see any reason that has to be."

The Blazers owe a big chunk of their success to Halper-Stromberg, a

distance runner in track who used the fall to play soccer the past three years. But Fritz-Mauer's persistence eventually landed the team its No. 1 runner.

"During outdoor track [last spring], every single conversation I had with Jossi ended with: 'So you're doing cross country, right?'" Halper-Stromberg said.

Halper-Stromberg led the Blazers all year, but according to coach Angelique Bosse, the team put corporate goals far ahead of individual ones. That's not just lip service. Knowing that this was the last cross-country race for two of their upperclassmen teammates, sophomores Essey Kidane and Matt Sheldon both gave up their spots on the state meet roster for four-year veterans Stephen Acton and Daniel Mauer.

"That's the kind of teamwork that is really helping us," Bosse said.

Class 3A girls

Back to Montgomery County's newest redhead, Ashley St. Denis.

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Trojans have made it clear to every-

cost us the game," said Wootton

X-COUNTRY

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Facing a determined foe in Dulaney senior Tenke Zoltani, the 1999 4A state champion who appeared poised to win another title and make a run at breaking Quince Orchard senior Karen Pulliam's course record of 18:52, St. Denis was a tad frazzled earlier last week.

Coach Greg Dunston and assistant coach Tom Martin tried to calm her down by reminding her that during a 4x100-meter relay leg at an outdoor track meet in Annapolis last spring, she out-kicked Zoltani. They also worked her extra hard on downhills and simulated "the maze" section of Hereford's course, where St. Denis made her final move on Zoltani.

"The main strategy was convincing her she could run with Zoltani," Martin said. "We had to convince her she was a state champion before the race."

St. Denis came into the race loaded with motivation. Her shoes bore the initials of her brother, Brendan, who died in a drowning accident in August.

Dunston scribbled the words "Great program, strong tradition" on her bib to remind her of the school's legacy. And the thought that Pulliam started making her mark as a sophomore raced through her mind. Fully equipped, St. Denis survived several Zoltani surges and finished 22 seconds ahead of her in 19:27.

"I didn't think I would do it," St. Denis said, "but after the race started, I thought, 'Hey, if she can do it, why can't I?'"

Dulaney won the team title with 55 points, while Walter Johnson finished third (97).

Class 4A girls

The pain must have seemed like a distant memory to Pulliam early Saturday afternoon — the months of physical and mental recovery now an afterthought. She was once again state champion.

Pulliam distanced herself from the pack and defended her 2000 4A state title in a much slower time (19:27, compared to 18:52) but still won with ease over Broadneck sophomore Lauren Centrowitz (19:59.7).

RAMS

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Lackey's victory put an end to an unlikely Rockville run in the postseason. The Rams entered the

Lackey has never won a state volleyball title, but this year's team may be one of destiny.

The Chargers advance to the 2A state semifinals on Wednesday at 8 p.m. against North Region champion Towson at the Community Col-