

Pontiac harriers' move up clears way in Class A

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The favorite to win this season's Class A prep cross-country championship got sacked before the first race.

Here's the scenario: Pontiac High School returned its best three runners, including star Todd Lopeman, from a team that won state by 54 points last season. But a mid-summer merger with Saunemin and Odell High Schools raised the school's enrollment to 778, and into Class AA.

"It's safe to say we would have won the title again had that not happened," said Pontiac coach Frank Corney. "It was a tough break for us."

And a blessing for the rest of Class A.

Schools such as Mahomet-Seymour, Chrisman, Delavan, Kane and Oakwood raced in to fill the void — and will challenge for the championship across the 3.1-mile course at 10 a.m. Saturday at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

MAHOMET-SEYMOUR, ranked No. 3 behind Delavan and Chrisman by one publication, has one of the most balanced teams in the state. The Bulldogs' leading five runners — Jamie Fancher, Jeff Jankowski, Dan Nielsen, Jay Busey and Brian Easter — finished only 22 seconds apart in racing M-S to second at last week's Hoopston Sectional.

"I see Delavan as having the inside track but there are several teams that can win it," said M-S coach John King. "This group runs as well as a team as any I've ever had. It might not be the most talented. But the kids work together extremely well, and if they run the way they are capable, they've got a shot at it."

Fancher, a senior, has been the Bulldogs' No. 1 runner most of the season, clocking 15:30 to finish 14th at the sectional. He also is a stand-out wrestler, going 29-6 as a 145-pounder last season to help M-S place third in the state.

Jankowski, a junior, has fluctuated near the top, and has the potential to challenge Fancher for No. 1, said King. Nielsen is a gifted freshman who has never finished below third this season.

Busey, a junior, is one of the team

leaders. Easter is a newcomer who quarterbacked the freshman football team last season and has risen as high as third on the c-c team.

"We've got a really nice blend," King said. "And (sophomore) Hans Walters and (senior) Clay Masters are capable of running among the top five, too. This is the first time for all of them in a state meet, and you're always concerned how a team will react. Usually, it either collapses or it runs a lot better. We're hoping we run a lot better."

Chrisman and Oakwood are the other area Class A teams to qualify. Westville senior Brian Towell, Watseka junior Robert Love and Monticello senior David Crockett also qualified as individuals.

NO LOCAL CLASS AA team or athletes qualified.

Chrisman defeated Mahomet-Seymour in the sectional and last season finished 14th in the state.

Oakwood returns its top four runners from a team that placed 17th last season. The Comets have been hindered by injuries, but the recovery of top runner Brian Harmeson has coach Ray Wittmann optimistic.

"The only teams that have beaten us this year are Delavan, Chrisman and Mahomet-Seymour, and they are the top three ranked teams in the state," Wittmann said. "This is our fifth time going to the state meet. I feel good about our chances."

Harmeson, a junior, and sophomore Jeff Trask give Oakwood a strong 1-2 punch. Junior kenny Gray is solid No. 3, and freshman Randy Miller and sophomore Chad Schoolcraft have been productive. Nathan Howie, the team's No. 5 runner, was lost for the season with a lung infection.

Wittmann believes Oakwood's experience at state last season is invaluable.

"The first time is always a shock," he said. "You can tell the kids about it, but nothing prepares them for the first 800 or 900 yards. Our kids are real confident."

Chrisman, led by sophomore twins Karen and Kathy Morris, is the only News-Gazette area girls' team to reach the finals. A pair of freshmen, Rantoul's Amy Bersig and St. Joseph-Ogden's Ashley Wright, qualified as individuals.



News-Gazette photo by Brian K. Johnson

Senior Jamie Fancher leads Mahomet-Seymour into the Class A State Cross-Country Championships on Saturday at Peoria. The Bulldogs, a well-balanced team, are ranked third in the state.

"Running against all the big schools really makes it tough," said Chrisman coach Roger Beals. "Had we been going against small schools only, I think we would have had a chance to finish pretty high."

The individual favorite is Wheeling's Dana Miroballi — seeking an unprecedented fourth straight championship. Wheeling did not qualify as a team, so Miroballi will

be running for herself.

SJ-O coach Jerry Hewerdine expects Wright to profit from race.

"It's a good experience for her to run against this kind of competition," Hewerdine said. "She didn't run one of her better races at the sectional. But I think she will come back and run well Saturday. I think Ashley can finish in the top 25."