

ON TOP OF THEIR GAME

Area teams grab two titles; Davis and Ponder go 1-2 in 1A race

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PEORIA — Area athletes dropped a prolific 1-2 punch Saturday on the state cross-country scene.

Individually, Oakwood/Armstrong-Potomac's Jon Davis and Tuscola's Eric Ponder swept the top two spots in the IHSA Class 1A boys' championship race.

Davis' area-record time of 14 minutes, 20 seconds was just off the all-time IHSA small-school mark (14:18) and broke the 1A mark (14:22) in the 69th running of the meet at Detweiller Park.

Teamwise, girls' squads from St. Joseph-Ogden and Urbana Uni High were first to the finish in Class 1A.

Monticello's boys made history, capturing the school's first team state title in any sport with a 52-point margin of victory over Elmwood.

In Class 2A, Mahomet-Seymour's second-ranked Bulldogs secured their first-ever cross-country trophy, placing second in the 26-school meet.

Davis and Ponder were running side-by-side for the first mile, covering that distance in 4:44. Davis, who repeated as the state champion, pulled away and beat Ponder by 42 seconds.

In the end, he said, "it was me and the wind. The wind was pretty bad, but everything fell into place."

Davis had pre-determined times in mind for each mile. He was four seconds off the pace after a mile and nine seconds off the pace after 2 miles.

"Then he ran his fastest mile, 4:41 to close," said former Oakwood runner Justin Jones, who has helped train Davis. "Before the race, he said he thought he could run 14:20, which I thought was a little ambitious. His last 400 (meters) was blazing.

"He found another gear. This place was electric."

Confidence accompanied Davis to the course on Saturday. "I had no reason to think I

couldn't get the record," he said.

For the day's three boys' races, only the Class 3A champion (McHenry's Jesse Reiser in 14:11), was quicker on the course than Davis.

"This year, it's a different taste in my mouth," Davis said. "Last year, since it was the first, there was the extra shock value and being the darkhorse made it better. This year, the record feels great. I'm happy with my performance."

Ponder was Tuscola's highest-ever individual placer.

"Knowing the top two from our regional (at St. Thomas More) were the top two in the state, it was a good day," he said. "Now, I'm pumped for track. I'll try to go after Jon in track."

Monticello senior Matt Norvell placed 13th and was the other area boy in 1A to earn all-state honors.

He had instant feedback on his finish when he entered the chute but had to endure a wait of nearly 45 minutes to learn his team's fate.

"Before the race and that part (afterward) was almost worse than during the race as far as stress," Norvell said.

The wait was worth it.

The Sages' five scoring runners crossed the finish line within 40 seconds of one another, and it was good enough for the school to capture its fourth boys' trophy in the sport in the past five years.

The team had placed third three times in the previous four seasons.

"We've been in the hunt quite a few years, and to finally accomplish it is really satisfying," Justin Furcich said.

Individually, Furcich was 26th, two seconds beyond the 25th — and final — all-stater.

"I'd much rather see the team be victorious than for me to be 25th," Furcich said.

For the second straight year, the top-ranked Sages entered the state finals after team crowns



Nora Maberry-Daniels/The Leader

St. Joseph-Ogden's girls' cross-country team is welcomed back to St. Joseph-Ogden High School after winning the girls' Class 1A title at the state meet Saturday.

in the conference, regional and sectional meets.

Coach Dave Remmert had an inkling how things were going long before his final runner completed the 3-mile course.

"At the 2-mile mark, they looked phenomenal," Remmert said. "We focused on the preparation and left the rest up to God."

Monticello's other scoring runners were Zach Mesplay (29th in 15:38), James Kilby (33rd in 15:41) and Will Montgomery (53rd in 16:00).

Abby Fisher has always wanted to help St. Joseph-Ogden have the success in cross-country that the school enjoyed in 1990, when it captured a Class 1A state championship.

"Even when I was a freshman, I dreamed about it," Fisher said. "As I got older, it seemed less and less realistic."

On Saturday, her dreams came true.

Fisher was among three Spartans who earned all-state honors individually while helping the team secure the top spot on the award stand, with an 84-point margin of victory over runner-up Uni High.

"They were very relaxed, and they looked great," SJ-O coach Jason Retz said.

Former Spartan Alyssa Pride-more liked what she saw from her former teammates before the starter's pistol sounded.

"She said it was as loose as she's seen a girls' team," Retz said. "Not unfocused. Just loose."

Freshman Faith Houston led the Spartans, running 12th in 18:02. Junior Abby Gawthorp was 16th (18:15), and Fisher, a senior, was 23rd (18:24).

The team's other scoring runners completed a pack that was within 63 seconds of Houston. Hayley Grice was 43rd (18:55), and Keely Smith was 53rd (19:05).

"They fought all the way through," Retz said. "All seven of our runners ran their career-best, our two freshmen (Houston and Grice) by 30 seconds."

As he looked at the award podium, Retz had reason to smile beyond the showing of his team.

"I'm pumped that two schools so close together got to stand on the podium together," Retz said. "Doug (Mynatt) has done an unbelievable job at Uni."

Uni High had the area's top individual placers in 1A. Arielle Summitt was third (17:17) and Annemarie Michael was fifth (17:27), both in lifetime bests.

"There's no disappointment in second as a team," Mynatt said. "It was great to see us run like we did."

Mahomet-Seymour's boys had the showing that coach Neal Garrison thought was possible.

All seven of his state runners broke the 16-minute mark and, as a group, the seven finished

within 59 seconds of each other.

It was a good enough showing to help the Bulldogs secure the second-place trophy in Class 2A while attaining the school's top finish.

"The pressure at state is tough," Garrison said. "Our guys performed well. Our goal was top three (teams) and we're happy to get that."

M-S had two athletes earn all-state honors. Alex Keeble was the first junior finisher (14:49), placing fourth. Senior William Wolf was 18th (15:01).

Danville's Caleb Hummer, who was the race leader at the 2-mile mark, finished sixth place in 14:52.

Champaign Central's Ashton Hyatt was 12th (14:55), becoming the school's first-ever all-state runner.

Mahomet-Seymour's Lauren Whitehouse became the school's fourth female all-stater, all in the past 13 years. She was eighth Class 2A in 17:42.

Danville's Mercedes Elliott was 27th in 18:01, and missed all-state honors by three seconds.

Jessica Franklin, from Arthur Okaw Christian, won the Christian school national cross-country meet in Dayton, Tenn. Her time of 19:19 broke the course record of 19:24.15 in a 5-kilometer race on top of the Appalachian Mountains.