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Published by DyeStatIL

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Above Photo: Lake Zurich's trio of Brian Griffith, Kyle Griffith and Matt Pereira after they took the top 3 places at the 3A Palatine Regional on October 24 (Mike Newman Photo)

By Michael Newman  
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The fields are now set for the 15 sectional meets that will take place across the state on Saturday. The prize at the end of the rainbow is a trip to the IHSA State Cross Country Meet in twelve days.

Some of the state's top cross country coaches were gracious with their time in their busiest part of the season and gave us some feedback on how their teams preformed at the regional meets last Saturday.

Here is what they had to say.

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A course record was set at Saturday's West Chicago Regional by a Naperville North runner. It was not by Judy Pendergast who is their #1 runner. Junior Sara Schmitt stepped up to lead the #1 team in the state running 17:39 to win by 2 seconds ahead of Plainfield North's Rachael Lau. The Huskies scored 32 points to win without top five runners Pendergast and Clare Hamilton who is resting due to a minor injury."

"We did run very well, I thought. It was good to do that well with limiting ourselves while resting Judy and Claire. We did just rest Judy, as she wants to run Footlocker, and skipping regionals was a way to limit her races going into the State/NXN/FL series. As for Claire, she has a strain in one of her hips. That's

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why we held her out of DVC, and she probably could have gone yesterday, but we elected to hold her back another week as well, as we hope to have her as close to 100% as possible for State/NXN if we can," Naperville North Dan Iverson said. "But long story short, to do well in what seems to be the deepest regional in the state without those two makes us feel very good about where we are at right now. We know we will be tested severely by the addition of Batavia and Geneva to the mix this week, but we definitely look forward to the challenge."

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Neuqua Valley has showed their strength after losing their #1 runner Connor Horn to an injury. It has only been a setback for the #4 team in 3A Boys heading into this week's West Aurora Sectional. The Wildcats have put together two perfect weeks scoring a perfect score of 15 points at the DuPage Valley Conference Meet on October 16 and then again at the West Chicago Regional last Saturday. It will tough to do that for a third straight week especially with the competition that will be in the sectional meet at Stuart Sports Complex.

"We played with our lineup a bit to see if we can find out who is most ready for the State meet. Jackson Jett twisted his ankle about 1.5 miles into the race but should be fine. The guys had a solid race considering we trained through the meet," said Neuqua Valley Coach Paul Vandersteen. "Scott Anderson will race at Sectionals for the first time since Hornet-Red Devil to see if he will be part of the State lineup. A couple other guys that did not run at the regional meet will also return to the lineup."

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One of the toughest things for an athlete to go through is an injury. Neuqua Valley's Connor Horn can attest to that. He is out for the season with a stress fracture that was discovered just before the DuPage Valley Conference Meet.

Another unfortunate injury happened on Saturday at the St. Charles North Invitational when West Aurora's Connor McCue injured his foot just after 2 miles of the race. He ended up finishing 46<sup>th</sup> failing to qualify for the sectional meet. It was a blow to the senior who had been coming on strong the last couple of weeks winning the West Aurora Stampede and then a week ago at the Upstate Eight Conference Meet.

"After speaking with several coaches who saw him past 2 miles, he had over a 35 second lead on second place. Somewhere on the Fire Trail he stepped wrong and head his foot snap and went down. The Geneva and St. Charles East runners told their coaches that they never saw him

Anyways, 2 of my guys picked him up and forced him to finish running. They are great teammates but probably not the best decision in hindsight," said West Aurora Coach Tony Rizzo. "I spoke with him last night and it really has not settled in yet, with either of us I think. Injuries are unforeseen and where he has a hard time coping is that he has just found his "groove" for cross. There is no doubt he would have won the Regional and then we would have found out a lot at the Sectional with racing Keegan Smith."

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Whitney Young is having a great season having won the city championship and then the regional meet last Saturday. One of the keys for their team has been the emergence of Sam Rivera. The freshman has been part of the team's top 5 most of the season. "There has been reports that Sam Rivera was kicked off the team. That is not true, he is injured and maybe out for the season," said Coach Billy Poole-Harris. "It was fun to win regionals for the first time ever."

Whitney Young is ranked tenth in the latest DyeStat Illinois Rankings (October 20, 2015) and is in position to qualify for the state meet this Saturday at the 3A Lake Park Sectional.

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It is tough for an athlete to be emotionally ready for a meet four weeks in a row. It is a proven fact. You will have a letdown during that span. That happened to the Downers Grove South Girls team at Saturday's Plainfield South Regional. The Mustangs, ranked #14 in the latest 3A DyeStat Illinois rankings, finished third in the meet behind Lockport and Benet Academy. They did qualify for this week's Hinsdale Central Sectional. They live to run another race. Finishing in the top five at that meet will mean a trip to Peoria for the IHSA State Meet on November 7.

"Our 3rd place team finish was a little disappointing as I felt we were capable of running much better as a group. It was reminiscent of our meet at Naperville earlier in the season when we had similar results," said Downers Grove South Coach Doug Plunkett. "Hopefully we will regroup and compete better next week, the same as we did after the Naperville race."

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One of the best regional meets of the weekend occurred at the York Regional held at Proviso West High School. The top teams in both races did not hold any of their top runners out. It gave the fans watching the races an indication of what they could see in the next few weeks. For the first half of the Girls race, Wheaton-Warrenville South had a slight point lead on the #2 team in the state Glenbard West. The Hilltoppers took over in the final with a 36-40 lead and crossing the line winning 33 to 41. Part of

Glenbard West's success was due to a great race by Grace Rogers. The senior was in 7<sup>th</sup> with a kilometer to go. She made a move passing Wheaton-Warrenville South's Allison McGrath in the final few meters to clinch third place.

"I thought Grace Rogers ran amazing for us. She ran like one of the top kids in the state today. She was not too far off Sara Atkins which is saying something," Glenbard West Coach Paul Hass said. "I think the kids moved pretty well but some of them did not have their best races. That is encouraging to have a good race performance in a regional with some of your kids not performing well. We still have some work to do obviously and we hope to get better next week. The kids know that. You can't complain when you don't have your best race and still come away with the regional title."

Wheaton-Warrenville South will move up from their #11 position in the latest state rankings. The Tigers ran one of their best races of the year so far bouncing back from a so-so performance at their conference meet 8 days before. It had South Coach Rob Harvey smiling afterwards.

"I think last week the girls had more in them and they felt that. They were eager to get out and prove that. They were ready to race the next day because they knew they did not race like they wanted to at conference" Harvey said after the race. "We really ran a good race today. Glenbard is a great team and Paul (Hass) is a great coach. To be that close to them is confidence building for us. Second place is as good as sixth place. You move on. We will be ready for Lake Park next week."

The Boys race was extremely tactical as winds whipped around the course at 20 miles mph at some points of the race. That did not matter to the runners in that race especially to the Dukes of York. The 3A #3 team in the state put 6 runners in the top 10 to win the team race ahead of #5 Oak Park River Forest. The race had York Coach Joe Newton walking on air. "That was one of the greatest team efforts. I told our guys that if you did not finish in the top 15, you did not run a lick today," Newton said. "We had six guys in the top ten. I am as happy as a lark. They ran good and getting better every week. They are a good group of guys. They have paid the price."

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There were some that were ready to write off the Lake Zurich Boys team after the Palatine Invitational at the end of September. The Bears finished sixth in that race. Yes, they had three runners towards the front but had an overall split on their scoring five at over 2 minutes. That has changed in the past few weeks as now that gap has shrunk to 67 sections. Matt Pereira, Brian & Kyle Griffith took the top 3 places at Saturday's Palatine Regional.

"I think our team performance was okay today. Eric Metzger, the sophomore, ran well today. The top three looked strong. Pat Burns was a little off today," Coach J.B. Hanson said. "We had a good margin ahead of Buffalo Grove today but that would have been different if Kevin Salvano runs. We know that. We will just have to go out and try to do that again next week."

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One of the toughest sectionals in the state is the 1A St. Teresa Sectional in Decatur. The Boys race on Saturday will be brutal as seven teams are ranked in the top twelve in the state. The Girls race will be just as tough as six teams are ranked in the first fifteen. That shows how tough the east-central portion of the state is. The Paxton-Buckley-Loda Regional on Saturday was a mini preview for the sectional meet. It showed how tough this area was as the #4 St. Joseph-Ogden won the Girls race with 42 points. 1A #1 Urbana University was second with 47 points followed by #2 Tolono Unity with 50 points. Urbana U-High Coach Doug Mynatt did not seem that discouraged after the meet. He went through this last year as his team finished fourth at the sectional and then followed that up with a second place finish at the state meet.

"Even though we didn't come away with a regional title, the meet had plenty of positives for us. It was the first race for Arielle Summitt since she won the Twin City title on October 6, so it was very encouraging to see her come away with the individual win and to see her continue to progress both mentally and physically as she's dealt with her injury from early in the 2015 track season. And, with her third-place effort, Annemarie Michael is finally coming around to the form I've expected to see from her as she, too, has been dealing with an injury from last Spring," Mynatt said. "We went in to this meet knowing we had the incredible opportunity to go head to head with two of the best teams in the state for three consecutive state-series meets and that's exciting. Whether we finished first, second, or third, we know we will be able to come away with something positive, something to be proud of and something to be happy about. As a coach, it's so much fun being at these meets and being around the athletes. We give them so much respect for."

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Shelbyville hosted their own sectional and came out on top in the Boys race. The #2 team in the latest 1A rankings (October 20) scored 80 points ahead of a good field that included second place #8 Carlinsville. Shelbyville Coach Kevin Kramer knows the task will be more difficult this weekend with all of those good teams ready to go at Decatur. "Our goal was to run just good enough to get win yesterday. We achieved that goal. It helped that Carlinsville went tempo up front," Kramer said. "Preston Henze started the race for us but I pulled him at two mile mark with some breathing issues. Didn't want him straining at all coming off of injury. Our goal this week will be to advance in a very tough sectional. If we do that we feel we will have a great meet at state. We welcome the great competition."

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Mahomet-Seymour Coach Neal Garrison did not really talk about his top ranked team in 2A after the East Peoria Sectional on Saturday. He raved about the Normal University team behind him. Mahomet-Seymour won that race 41 to 53 ahead of U-High but the impression of the Pioneers was in Garrison's mind. U-High junior Jack Franklin won that race by 5 seconds ahead of one of the top 2A runners in the state Alex Keeble. The young Normal team has 2 freshman and 2 sophomores in their top 7. They moved to #5 in the 2A rankings after the Richard Spring Invitational after their squad finished second in the Frosh/Soph race. They have been there ever since.

"I am pleased with where our boys are right now," Garrison said. "I was most impressed with Normal U-High's performances as both individuals and as a team. Their coach (Lester Hampton) does a great job getting his runners to peak at the right time. He is a top notch coach that I have had the privilege to learn so much from over the years as he has been in our conference. His young runners have done an amazing job the past two weeks with super strong races. Jack Franklin has a ton of heart and ran with so much intensity. He was fun to watch run. U-High really had the meet of the day even though the team score ended up in our favor."

The two teams have raced the last two weeks and will meet up again at the Normal University Sectional. They will meet again one more time if both teams qualify for the state meet.

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Freeburg does not get that much coverage because they are a team that is located in the southern portion of the state. This program is on the rise with both the Boys and Girls teams in the 1A state rankings. The #11 Boys team won the New Athens Regional with 22 points led by the 1-2 finish by Charlie Parrish and Alex Mack. The #13 Girls team finished second in their race behind and up and coming #18 Breese Mater Dei squad.

"I was really happy with the Boys team performance. We placed 4 in the top 5 overall. Charlie Parrish and Alex Mack cruised the entire race. Pack time was appx 1:10, which I was happy with. Our #3-5 runners (Carson Smith, Blake Hatter, and Corbin Schwable) are all freshmen. They all ran strong! A big key for us is to keep getting the 3-5 as close to Charlie and Alex," Coach Carl Florcyk stated. "For our Girls team, I am happy with how yesterday went. It was a great race between us and Mater Dei. Mater Dei has come on strong. We look forward to racing against them next week at the sectional. We trained through the regional this week, as we had a couple of hard workouts. We are hoping it pays off the next 2 weeks. Ashley Gilmore had a terrific race. She moved up throughout the entire race. It was one of her best races of her career."

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A young Chatham-Glenwood program is one to keep an eye on the next few weeks including the state meet. Both Boys and Girls teams are ranked in the top 12 in 2A. There were a few weeks where the Titans did not run their best in the middle of the season. Coach Mike Garber had his team go back to what worked best early in the year. Both teams were second in the Jacksonville Regional last Saturday. It did not have Garber down at all. "Saturday was a great day for our sport. Neither of Glenwood's teams won, but they learned a valuable lesson," Garber said. "What worked at the beginning of the season can work again. We had strayed from pack racing in the last few weeks and the team got back to it this weekend. We train as a group, we race as a group and we succeed as a group. The kids are only getting stronger and are ready to peak at the right time. The high level competition is making everyone in the area better right now. These kids are chomping at the bit to get back out and race next weekend."

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One of the surprises of this season in 1A Girls has been the emergence of Liberty High School. The team has been on the edge of doing some great things the past few years. They ended last year by finishing eighth last year at the Elmwood-Brimfield Sectional. This season has been the breakthrough year for the Eagles as they have moved up to #4 in the rankings. Liberty won their regional race at Franklin last Saturday without 2 of their top 5 runners including #1 star freshman Katelyn Robbins. They defeated two top ten teams #8 PORTA and #10 Springfield Lutheran without those two.

"We ran well Saturday. It was truly a team effort considering we didn't run Katelyn and Katie Cook (our #1 & #4). Our 6th runner yesterday may have been the difference in us winning and losing and we had some girls step up big for us in the 3 and 4 spots yesterday. To have that depth on our squad is a very nice luxury to have. I would not have been surprised or disappointed if we had lost yesterday. Both PORTA and Springfield Lutheran are very good teams, but to come out on top is nice and a big confidence boost to our girls heading into Saturday," Liberty Coach Jared Schmidt said. "As far as Katelyn is concerned, she had some leg pain earlier last week so we chose to be cautious with her and held her out of Patriot as much as both she and I wanted her to race. The long term goals outweighed the short term. We knew in June that she would not race at regional if we could keep from it due to the course. Both Katie and Katelyn will be in spikes Saturday assuming this week goes to plan."

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The other surprise of this year in 1A Girls has been the rise of Springfield Lutheran. Now #10 in the latest 1A rankings, this team did not start out that season that way. They were not ranked in the pre-season mainly because they had only 4 runners on the team. Their first jump into the rankings was after they

finished seventh at the Springfield Invitational on September 26 only 12 points behind Liberty. The addition of freshmen Brigid and Bernadette Tournoux along with the addition of #5 runner Tori Hollinshead have put the Crusaders into a position that few thought that they would be in a year ago. Only sisters Jackie and Maddy Eck were on the team then.

"Saturday was a great day all around. I believe it was the first time in Lutheran History that a Girls team has advanced to Sectionals. That was an accomplishment in itself for our team! Sectionals will be a tough and tight race. We are lacking in a strong 5th runner. Our 5th runner joined us late in the season and she's still new to the sport and figuring out on how to race 3 miles but she shows up and gives it everything," said Springfield Lutheran Coach Ashley Thomasa. "We also had too much of a separation from the Eck sisters and the Tournoux twins at Franklin. Hopefully, we will have closer pack running on Saturday. It will be a close call between us, Stanford Olympia, and Mackinaw. We placed ahead of Knoxville and Mercer County at Peoria so I'm crossing my fingers that we can do it again! I just know that the girls are ready to compete to the best of their abilities as individuals and, more importantly, as a TEAM! They have dealt with some challenges but now have the good fortune to "Run Free."

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That is it for this week. Good luck to all competing next weekend at the sectional meets!

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