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# Unity runners 'going to be hard to beat'

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TOLONO — Heading into high school, Andrew Warnes ran only so his breath wouldn't shorten as he jogged up and down the basketball court.

For Getch Eisenmenger, running was his secondary sport to soccer, the game he grew up playing as a youngster in Ethiopia before moving to Tolono at age 12.

But at one time or another, the Unity seniors found they had a knack for 3-mile races.

In Warnes' third year of high school cross-country and Eisenmenger's second, the Rockets are heavily favored to win a Class 1A state title with a pair of converts leading the way. But that doesn't tell the whole story.

"They potentially could be the best Class A team ever," St. Joseph-Ogden coach Jason Retz said.

A year ago, that wasn't close to being the case. Eisenmenger suffered a knee injury during his first year of cross-country that kept him out until the middle of the season.

And when it came time for the state meet, Warnes had what he called an "off race" and finished 48th in 15 minutes, 58 seconds. Eisenmenger led the Rockets to a fourth-place finish in his first few months of cross-country with a 30th-place time of 15:39.

This year, the Rockets' top five runners, which also include Alex Morris, Austin Woodard and Dawson Dodds, have personal bests of 15:18 or better. Last year, 15:18 would have been good for 12th in Class 1A and sixth the year before.

After running 15:42 earlier this season, No. 6 runner Robert Decker may also have a shot at earning all-state honors in the top 25, an incredible feat for a non-scoring runner.

"I'm not much for blowing our own horn, but I'll tell you, these kids are good," coach Dike Stirrett said. "We're going to be hard to beat at the state meet.

"We're not taking anything for granted or anybody lightly. There's still some very good teams ... but I'll tell you what, they're going to have to pop up a long way to beat us."

After combining with Eisenmenger, Decker and Griffin Boyer for the 3,200-meter relay state title last spring, Warnes ran a personal-best time of 14:44 earlier this season, a time that would have finished second in the state last season. They'll arrive at Detweiller Park in Peoria as the team to beat, and Warnes likes it that way.

"Me, personally, I just have to put last year behind me," Warnes said. "Stick to our stuff, stick to our plan, and we should be able to prevail at the end.

"There's definitely some pressure there, being on a pedestal, everybody's looking at you. But I think we've embraced that, and we do better under that pressure. I think it makes us perform at a higher level."

The Rockets will concentrate toward the front of the race Saturday, but Stirrett doesn't want them dictating the pace. Instead, he wants them to run strategically, pacing off other runners.

If they can do that, a state title is a near certainty. But the Rockets are so talented that even on a day that's not their best, they still may come away as champions.

"We don't have to run great," Stirrett said. "We just have to run a solid race, and we're going to be very tough to beat. I'm not trying to brag. I don't like that; I don't like blowing our own horn. But I've got to give these kids credit. They're tough."

### **Boys' state cross-country lineup**

*(All races Saturday at Detweiller Park, Peoria)*

#### **CLASS 1A**

**Arthur-Lovington-Atwood-Hammond:** Logan Hall

**Monticello:** Luke Alexander, Keegan Davis, Garrett Dixon, Alex Helmuth, James Kilby, Zach Mesplay, Logan Peters, Eric Tate, Patrick Tracy, J.C. Wilkin, Nick Wilkin

**Oakwood:** Jon Davis

**Paxton-Buckley-Loda:** Nick Porter

**Prairie Central:** Jacob Maquet

**St. Joseph-Ogden:** Austin Earp, Brennan Guido, Gabe Lyons, Justin Phillips, Nate Phillips, Braden Pridemore, Austin Rein, Ross Smetzer, Mitchell Thompsen, Wyatt Wolfersberger

**Unity:** Robert Decker, Dawson Dodds, Getch Eisenmenger, Rhett Frank, Nathan Gonzalez, Alex Morris, Evan Morris, Nathan Seiler, Andrew Warnes, Austin Woodard, Cameron Woodard, Luke Woods

#### **CLASS 2A**

**Danville:** Brandon Barfell, Jeremiah Cooley, Terry Dalton, Phillip Hall, Noah Hile, Skyler Huckelberry, Tyler Huckelberry, William Powell, Roberto Rangel, Easton Towne, Carl Way, Sincere Williams-Davis

**Mahomet-Seymour:** Brian Butcher, Joe Churm, Ben Craw,