

# Rockets rise in battle of Class 1A's best

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DECATUR — The Class 1A Decatur St. Teresa Sectional cross-country meet pitted seven of the state's Top 10 boys' teams in competition, meaning two of those teams wouldn't make it to next week's state meet.

But for Unity, Saturday's race wasn't even a contest.

Andrew Warnes finished second in 14:53 and the Rockets scored 42 points, blowing away second-place Shelbyville by 65 points for the team title.

"I suppose this was probably our best team race of the year," coach Dike Stirrett said. "And yet we've been so good so often, it's kind of hard to pick one out. But I'm going to tell you, this late in the season it's good to be running where we're at."

No. 2 St. Joseph-Ogden finished third, led by Brennan Guido's 10th-place finish in 15:23, Justin Phillips' 14th-place finish in 15:38 and Austin Earp's 19th-place finish in 15:49. No. 4 Monticello finished fifth behind top-10 finishes from Zach Mesplay (sixth in 15:14) and Alex Helmuth (ninth in 15:20).

Along with No. 6 Carlinville, No. 10 Paxton-Buckley-Loda didn't qualify as a team, but the Panthers' Nick Porter qualified as an individual.

Even facing so many top teams, Unity didn't need to sweat. Five Rockets runners — Warnes, Getch Eisenmenger, Austin Woodard, Alex Morris and Dawson Dodds — finished in the top 15 as they let the pack dictate the pace.

"They get out and they don't push the pace," Stirrett said. "They ride the pace. We let the other teams and the

other lead runners dictate the pace, and we just stay up in the top 10 or 12."

**Unity girls win tiebreaker.** As Unity girls' cross-country coach Kara Leaman counted runners as they crossed the line, she didn't think the Rockets would win what was sure to be a tight competition between the top-three ranked teams in the state at the Class 1A Decatur St. Teresa Sectional.

Her mental math was wrong. Unity finished tied on points with Urbana Uni High at 74, but the Rockets' No. 6 runner, MacKenzie Brunk, finished five spots higher than Uni High's in 34th place to give Unity the tiebreaker.

"It was kind of a surprise," Leaman said. "When you take all of the girls that aren't on teams out of the picture, it was kind of different. It was a nice surprise for sure."

Jordan Harmon led the way for Unity with a fifth-place finish in 18:13. Nicole Bagwell, Savannah Day, Miranda Fairbanks and Audrey Hancock all finished from 14th to 24th.

Uni High was led by Arielle Summitt's second-place finish in 17:38 and Annemarie Michael's third-place finish in 17:44. No. 3 St. Joseph-Ogden, which finished third, was led by Hayley Grice's eighth-place finish in 18:36 and Faith Houston's ninth-place finish in 18:40. Monticello's Morgan Elmore qualified for state individually.

"We've been going back and forth all season, and it's been exciting," Leaman said. "Part of the nature of the sport is the competition, and it's been fun. I don't know (how we'll finish) until we get (to state), but people say this is the toughest sectional. This gives us a lot

of momentum."

**Bulldogs win with reserves.** Mahomet-Seymour boys' cross-country coach Neal Garrison was so confident that his team would advance out of the Class 2A Normal University Sectional, he sat three of his top-seven runners.

His confidence was warranted. Led by Alex Keeble's second-place time of 15:24, the top-ranked Bulldogs scored 65 points to beat second-place Normal University by 43 on a drizzly day.

"We looked at different people and how tired they are, and we had some guys missing at band last week, so that changed things up a little bit," Garrison said of his decision-making.

Gabe Pommier took seventh for the Bulldogs in 15:39, Brian Butcher was ninth in 15:40, Ryan Hodge took 17th in 16:02 and Riley Fortune took 30th in 16:23.

Garrison said he could have picked from what he estimates were 17 different runners and still easily advanced his team to the state meet.

"Compared to my first several years of coaching, my 17th (runner) is faster than my No. 2 and 3 in our earlier years," he said. "Our eighth through 12th guys would be at least top five on any other team."

Danville also qualified out of the Normal University Sectional, led by Carl Way in 23rd in 16:09 and William Powell's 24th-place finish in 16:10.

Mahomet-Seymour qualified on the girls' side, led by Lauren Whitehouse's third-place time of 18:19 and Brisa McGrath's 22nd-place finish in 19:10. Danville's Mercedes Elliott also qualified individually.