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ILLINOIS DOMINANCE AT NXR MIDWEST REGIONAL - DYESTAT



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Carmel edges Naperville North for Girls Team, Neuqua Valley returns to Portland with Boys team win; Illinois' Hart, Kilrea earn individual wins

By Michael Newman

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Terre Haute --- The difference of the win in the team championship races in Sunday's NXR Midwest Regional at Lavern Gibson Championship Cross Country Course was evident as team champions Carmel IN and Neuqua Valley IL crossed the finish line. US #3 Neuqua Valley knew that they had won as soon as they crossed the finish line. US #2 Carmel IN had to wait an agonizing 90 minutes before they discovered that they won one of the two automatic spots for the Nike Cross Nationals in Portland in a month.

Where there were differences in the team races, both championship races had the flair for the dramatic finish. The first four finishers in the Girls race were only separated by five seconds. The Boys race had four runners under 15 minutes on the challenging 5 kilometer course with the winning time just missing the course record by three seconds.

Both races were extremely fast, 55 degrees with a slight breeze from the south is not normal for this region in the middle of November. The runners were not complaining.

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The leaders take the pace out fast setting 7 to 9 seconds back. In the second mile of the race, Hart noticed the pack was starting to gap here. She moved slowly towards the front. By the 3 kilometer point, Forsyth's lead had shrunk to three seconds as Hart was beginning to make her move. **India Johnson** (Hilliard Davison OH) was within 2 seconds of Hart. **Anna Sophia Keller** (Effingham St. Anthony IL) was another five seconds back but was moving closer to the leaders.

With 600 meters to go, Hart made her move. For a freshman, she has tremendous finishing speed. She did run 2:13 on the track last year for 800 Meters as an eighth grader. She entered the final 400 meters starting to pull away for the win. It looked like it would be easy but Johnson made a final surge but ran out of real estate. Hart crossed the line in 17:05.0 just 2.5 seconds ahead of Johnson. Forsyth finished third (17:09.1) holding off a charging Keller. The four time Illinois 1A championship had the fastest closing kilometer (3:21) out of all the runners in the race. Indiana State Champion **Tyler Schwartz** (DeKalb HS IN) captured the final qualifying spot finishing 19 seconds behind Keller. Four of the five individual qualifiers will be making their first trip to the Nike Cross Nationals. This is the third time that Keller has qualified for the national race. She did not go to Portland her freshman year.

"This is so amazing," Hart said. "There are so many great runners here. I'm so excited. I was not worried about the fast pace. I just wanted to stay in touch where I could make my move."

The Carmel team did not think they had finished in one of the two qualifying spots. Some of that had to do with their top runner **Sarah Leinheiser** unable to finish the race. As the team results were announced, their name was not called. The team was on their knees huddling in a circle arms wrapped around each other. The Greyhounds had finished fourth a year ago and had to wait three weeks to see if they would be returning. When Naperville North IL was announced as the second place team, tears of joy engulfed the group.

"In the back of our minds, we did not think we made it," **Maddie Dalton** said. "We just kept praying hoping that they would call our name first or second. We did not know where Sarah was after the race. We were just praying that she was okay."

I've been in a boot for the last week. I only ran twice during that time," Leinheiser said. "It hurt the entire race. When I got to the homestretch, my coach pulled me out. He said that I would only make it worse."

Carmel scored 108 points for the win only 12 points ahead of Naperville North. **Maddie Dalton** led the team with a 12th place finish. **Phoebe Bates** (23rd), **Christina Geisler** (27th), **Rachel Anderson** (30th), and **Izza Kuhrahm** (103rd) made up the rest of Carmel's top five. The spread on their top 4 runners was only 18 seconds. Without Leinheiser finishing, the spread on their top five was 74 seconds.

Naperville North had to wait 3 weeks before finding out that they had earned an at-large bid. The Illinois 3A champions took care of business with 120 points to finish second. **Sarah Schmitt** led the team with an 11th place finish. The Lady Huskies had a 61 second split on their top five runners. Illinois schools Minooka and Yorkville finished third and fourth and will have to wait to see if their teams will make the trip to Portland in December. Both teams deserve to be on the starting line. Minooka finish third (135 points) led by top 15 finishes by **Mackenzie Callahan** (8th), **Emily Shelton** (13th), and **Ashley Tutt** (15th). Yorkville scored 165 points to finish fourth led by **Alexis Grandys** (40th) and **Nicole Greyer** (41st). The split on their top five was only 36 seconds.

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Illinois 3A Boys State Champion **Soren Knudsen** (Minooka HS) was considered one of the individual favorites in this race. He had to drop out on Friday because of a hip injury that he came down with the week before his state race. Without Knudsen, it left the individual race up in the air. Just like the Girls race, the Boys race was blazing throughout.

**Gabe Fendel** (Hamilton Southeastern IN) was the runner who defined the pace of this race. He was by himself when he passed through the first mile in a fast 4:35. The pack was 4 seconds back led by **Dylan Jacobs** (Sandburg HS IL), **Danny Kilrea** (Lyons Township IL), and **Jack Aho** (Grayslake Central IL). It was Jacobs that made the first move between the 2 kilometer and 3 kilometer marks closing the gap on Fendel. It was then Kilrea's turn to push the pace as he passed

Jacobs just before the 4 kilometer point. Aho was with Fendel as the Indiana runner was just holding on for one of the five qualifying spots.

Kilrea made a race defining move at last week's state meet with Knudsen responding to it in the final 800 meters. With Knudsen not in Terre Haute, it looked like this would be Kilrea's win. It would not be easy. Jacobs refused to let Kilrea away from him as the two entered the final stretch of the race. The Lyons junior found a kick that he thought he lost at the beginning of the season. He pulled away from Jacobs to cross the line in 14:51.6 missing **Futsum Zienasselassie's** course

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"Last week's race (at state) gave me a lot of confidence knowing that I could run fast times and could compete with people in our state which is so good and other states as well. It was a big confidence booster," Kilrea said. "My coach gave me advice that someone would try to push the first mile and that I should stay within distance of him making my move at the two miles. That's what I exactly did. The more conservative strategy paid off."

Kilrea and Aho both ran in Portland last year and will be making return trips. It will be the first national appearance for Jacobs, Horter, and Fendl.

Neuqua Valley made it look easy as their top five ran within 17 seconds of each other to capture the team championship. "The only other time that I knew that we won right at the finish here was our 2007 team (led by **Chris Derrick**)," said Neuqua Valley Coach **Paul Vandersteen** who was there to watch his team run. That 2007 team went on to win the national title. It could happen to this team.

"We weren't really worried about the fast pace today," **Jake McEneaney** said. "We have a lot of confidence in that kind of a race. We really like to move in that final kilometer."

Neuqua Valley scored 88 points to lead Illinois schools to a sweep of the first four team places. **Jackson Jett** led Neuqua with an 18th place finish. He was followed by **Zach Kinne** (21st), **Jake McEneaney** (22nd), **Scott Anderson** (32nd), and **Matt Milostan** (39th). Downers Grove North will make their first appearance in Portland following their second place finish with 136 points. **Alec Danner** (20th) and **Jacob Ridderhoff** (23rd) led the Trojans that had a 23 second split on their top five.

Mahomet-Seymour IL won the 2A Boys State title last week and would have finished third if they were in the same race as Neuqua and Downers. They repeated that effort placing third (168 points) with a 30 second split on their top five. The Bulldogs put themselves in good position to make it to Portland but will have to wait for an at-large bid in three weeks. **Andrew Walmer** led his team with a 24th place finish. Lyons Township also could be a team to watch for an at-large bid as they finished fourth (189 points) led by Kilrea's win and the 28th place finish by **Vince Zona**.





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