

# CHAMPS

Continued from 7-D

"That rounded out our school and helped our team get the lowest points," Garrison said.

Kaelan Davis and Nate Douglas placed 120th and 166th, respectively, with times of 16:19 and 16:51.

"Kaelan Davis and Nate Douglas were also giving it a strong effort as they know that the sixth place runner breaks ties and the seventh bumps other teams points up," Garrison said.

"The most enjoyable thing for me this season," Davis said, "was seeing everybody push themselves to the limit and set a very positive tone that would help everyone perform well when it mattered. I couldn't ask for better people to run with."

"Going into the season we knew we had big shoes to fill," Douglas added, "so we worked hard. We ran farther, faster, and smarter than we did last year, as tough as that is to do."

"We ran workouts with everything we had to improve our speed and mental game for our races."

## Obstacles

Unlike last season, when the Bulldogs were ranked No. 1 throughout the year and rolled over almost every opponent they faced on their way to winning the state crown, this year's team had several obstacles to overcome to repeat as state champions.

The team dealt with losing four of the seven runners from last year, as well as injuries and illnesses.

"As far as this year's state meet, we had so many things that could have held our team back," Garrison said. "In the regional meet, we held out Bryson Keeble, as he had been sick twice that week. Senior Kyle Sheehy really stepped up for the team and ran in his place at the regional meet."

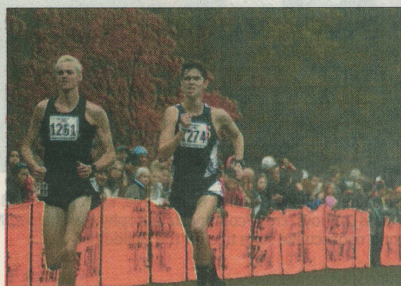
In the week leading up to the state, four of the top 12 runners were sick with strep throat.

"We knew that it could very well wipe out our team the morning of state, and it would be too late to get healthy," Garrison said. "Thankfully, our team was able to be ready to race on the morning of state."

Garrison included 12 runners on his state roster, which meant he could use five alternates in the state series. The alternates, who stuck around for three weeks training selflessly to help their team, included Joe Churm, Jack McHale, Sheehy, David Wilcoski and Garret Williams.

M-S placed second in the Class 2A Metamora Regional, which hosted seven state-ranked teams, at Black Partridge Park.

The Bulldogs tied Normal University with 49 points, but the Pioneers' fastest sixth-place runner broke the tie.



Daniel L. Chamness/for The Mahomet Citizen

Mahomet-Seymour senior Riley Fortune (No. 1274) chases Lansing-based Illiana Christian runner Austin Ohm as the two eye the finish line at the IHSA Class 2A state cross-country finals. Fortune finished sixth in 14 minutes, 48 seconds. Ohm finished in 14:47 and took fifth, as he was sandwiched between Bulldogs Mathias Powell and Fortune.

"Some state-ranked teams got eliminated in the regional meet due to sickness and injury," Garrison said. "Some teams often make the mistake of looking past the qualifying rounds only to fall short of making the state meet."

The second-place finish did advance the Bulldogs' team to the sectional, where the team won its sixth straight Class 2A sectional title. "Losing to Normal U-High in regionals was a wake-up call," Hodge said. "We knew that we would really have to refocus and understand that the state trophy wasn't going to come easy."

"We responded incredibly well to this, and were able to defend our state title."

"Many hardships were dealt with in the process of trying to be state champs," Keeble said. "Fortune went through two of the same ankle injuries within two months. I thought that we lost him at one point because he could barely walk for a fairly long time. Thankfully, he miraculously came back as the post-season began."

Keeble had his own issues with iron deficiency throughout the season.

"I could not perform even close to where I was," Keeble said. "There were many times where I broke down and it was hard to get back up, but it ended up resolving at the end."

Another obstacle the team faced once all the runners lined up for the race included the team's starting position.

"It is well-known if you get one of the inside starting boxes that you are at a great disadvantage," Garrison said. "The reason is that the 25 teams run toward the inside at the start and more or less smash the inside teams. We found out we had one of the historically worst starting boxes."

Despite the obstacles, Garrison knew this team was ready to compete.

"Despite all that could have went wrong, our runners did a great job of overcoming the obstacles rather than letting it hold them back," Garrison said.

According to Fortune, the Bulldogs' resolve is

what made them a special team this year.

"That's what separates our team from all others," Fortune said. "We came back with the willpower to want to work harder than we ever have, and we did."

"I love those guys and couldn't ask for anyone else to run next to my senior year."

## Pressure and expectations

Despite losing a couple meets late in the season and placing second in the regional, Garrison knew this year's success would depend on how well the team ran during the state meet.

After winning two runner-up trophies and a state championship trophy in the last three years, the expectations and pressure had been building.

"They had a lot of high expectations on them since we have done so well in the past," Garrison said. "Most high school athletes wouldn't have been able to handle this pressure. Yet, they all really gave it their all and it paid off. I was proud of them."

"We had high expectations for ourselves this year," Hodge said. "Last year, all the countless hours of hard work ended up paying off in a huge way. This year, we knew that if we did what the top guys did last year, we could do great things again."

"Expectations were definitely high before the season even started," Keeble added. "We were state champions and national qualifiers the year before. Although you don't get much better than that, the season was not a 'walk in the park' in the slightest."

The Bulldogs had three runners from last year's team, but many new runners had to step up to keep things going.

"I was so proud of them as they handled the pressure all year and at the state meet to be able to bring back the state championship trophy again," Garrison said.

The seniors (Burge, Churm, Fortune, Hodge, Sheehy and Williams) have been part of winning those four state trophies.

"We know it was more than the seniors that

## Bulldog runners reflect on banner season

*Over the summer and the course of the season, we put in tons of work trying to be the greatest team around.*

*Garrison does a great job of not putting too much pressure on us as a runner. He wants us to do great, and he tries his best to motivate us to work as hard as possible to be the best runners that we can be.*

EVAN BURGE, senior

*Overall, I think this season was a very rewarding one. Being able to see everyone improve from the previous season helped boost our confidence for the state series. We knew that our competitors were going to be very close to us time-wise, so we knew there was no extra room for relying on what we did last year.*

KAELAN DAVIS, junior

*We knew if we gave 100 percent of what we had into our sport, we would have a shot at a state title. We had so much fun training and pushing one another to be faster, and in the end we came out on top. Led by the best coach in the Midwest, we fully completed the goal we set for ourselves at the beginning of the season. It was one to remember.*

NATE DOUGLAS, junior

*I believe this season turned out the way we wanted it to. You can't ask for more than winning state. Yes, we had some points where we were down in the season, but it's not about when we are down; it's about how we decide to respond from being down.*

RILEY FORTUNE, senior

*We knew coming in that we would have a pretty big target on our backs because we had such a successful season last year. We knew that the competition was going to be ready to give us a run for our money this year. I think this group really responded well to the pressure, and we didn't let it get into our heads.*

RYAN HODGE, senior

*One of the things I admire most about this sport is that it takes tons of mental strength. Some say that we pushed our bodies to get there, I would say we pushed our minds. There was constant encouragement and mind-setting going on every single workout and race. All of this encouragement was from hope.*

BRYSON KEEBLE, junior

*It's been a really up-and-down season, and we've gone back and forth on how the team's been doing, but we were ready to race. So I was just really, really happy after the race. It was nice to know that we had actually pulled it off.*

MATHIAS POWELL, junior

helped contribute to the success of winning four state trophies," Garrison said, "but it is very much a credit to our six seniors that helped our program over the past four years."

The Bulldogs do not have as many runners as

some of the top cross-country programs across the state, but what they lack in quantity, they overcome with character.

"Many of the top cross-country programs in the state have 100 to 200 boy runners on their teams,"

Garrison said. "We have less than 20. While we don't have large numbers, we have a team year after year filled with runners who have great character."

"That has allowed us year after year to be successful."