

BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY

MAKING HISTORY

Powell wins first-ever individual state title for M-S



Daniel L. Chamness/for The Mahomet Citizen
Mahomet-Seymour's Mathias Powell competes during the second mile of the IHSAA Class 2A state cross-country meet on Saturday at Detweiller Park in Peoria. Powell beat his nearest competitor by 16.19 seconds.

**By ISAAC TROTTER
For The Mahomet Citizen**

As Mathias Powell reached the 2-mile mark, he glanced at the clock. It read 9 minutes, 30 seconds. So he turned on the jets, and no one was catching him.

The Mahomet-Seymour senior made history on Saturday by becoming the first Bulldog to win the individual state championship in cross-country.

"It was great," Powell said. "Just sort of a big relief. It had been such a big goal for the entire season. It was nice to know, not that it was over, but that it was finally done, and that I didn't screw it up."

Powell blazed Detweiler Park's 3-mile course in

14 minutes, 31.77 seconds which was a school record, breaking Alex Keeble's time of 14:36 set in 2015.

Powell smoked the 208 other runners in the Class 2A state meet, pacing the field by 16.19 seconds, the largest margin of victory in Class 2A in 11 years.

"The great thing about the Detweiler course is that last mile," Powell said. "You're completely surrounded by a huge crowd of fans. That really helps you push yourself the last mile. I saw the clock. I knew I had a chance to set a record, so I definitely tried to pick it up after that to get a better time."

As Powell crossed the finish line, numerous former and current cross-country mates were

waiting for him. As was his mom, Lisa Powell. Mathias embraced his mom just moments after winning the state championship.

"I was so relieved," Powell said. "I went over, and all my friends went to watch me, and they were freaking out. I went and hugged my mom. That was one of my favorite parts of the day, right after the race. It was an incredible moment. She just said congratulations. She thought I had run a good race and she was proud of me."

M-S didn't qualify for state as a team, but the entire team came to cheer on Powell and fellow senior Bryson Keeble.

"They didn't have to come, but they did because they are just awesome

guys who wanted to support us," Powell said. "We all did warmups together, and it really helped to have the team there. It was great."

Keeble finished 95th with a mark of 16:07 — his best time of the season. Keeble and Powell have been friends for years, and without Keeble, Powell may not have been able to win the state championship.

"I would've been so nervous if it had been just me there," Powell said. "It was great having him there. We've been best friends since like sixth grade, so it was great to go out on our last official high school race with him."

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M-S BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY STATE CHAMPION MATHIAS POWELL

CHAMP

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Head coach Neal Garrison has had a profound impact on numerous runners throughout his time leading the boys' cross-country program. Powell was no different.

"There is no chance that I would've been able to do anything that I've been blessed with the opportunity to do this season if it wasn't for Coach Garrison," Powell said. "He's just such a knowledgeable person about the entire sport. I can't even put it into words. He's done so much for me and my entire team. It's incredible."

'Target on my back'

Powell became the first Bulldog to be All-State three times. As a sophomore, Powell placed 18th. Last year, Powell finished fourth, behind three seniors. In every single race this year, Powell was a marked man.

"It was pretty intimidating at times," Powell said. "There was sort of a target on my back. I could tell that during races people were keying on me. They were pacing themselves based off how I was running the race. It makes the race a lot more political, involving a lot more strategy, a lot more mind games."

But Garrison's steady hand stepped in and Powell focused on doing what he does best: running.

"Coach did a phenomenal job, trying to keep me out of that as much as possible and not worrying about the little stuff like that," Powell said. "When it came to state day, it was the same thing. I tried to not freak out. I realized that I had raced everybody there before and that I could put myself to be in a position to be competitive in the race."

'I wanted to quit'

The road to becoming a state champion wasn't easy for Powell.

"If you had told me that I would be a state champion when I was a freshman, I would have laughed at you," Powell said. "After my freshman year, I wanted to quit. I was going to go play soccer. I had played soccer since fourth grade, but the guys convinced me to stay. I couldn't imagine what everything would be like if I hadn't stuck with cross-country."

Without Andrew Walmer, Powell would've likely joined the soccer team. But when Powell was a freshman, Walmer was a standout junior. Walmer drove Powell home regu-



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larly, and the talks in the car led to Powell sticking with cross-country.

Walmer was in the group of Bulldog alumni that watched Powell cross the finish line in first place.

"He was one of the guys who showed up," Powell said. "He's built our program so much. He set an amazing example of hard work and dedication when he was a senior which was when our program was at its height. That meant so much to me."

"These are guys that had invested into me since I was a freshman or a sophomore. They had really built our program into something extraordinary. I know we didn't make it to state this year, but the past few years have been very successful due to those guys. They are such strong runners and have done so much for our school and our cross-country program. It meant a lot that they would come there to support just my teammate and me."

The next chapter

Powell will head to Villanova University next fall to continue his running career. The Big East Conference will present some big-time challenges, but Powell is ready to embark on a new journey.

"I'm excited to get out there," Powell said. "I'm going to miss my family of course, but I'm sort of looking for a new area and a new challenge."

Powell clicked with the entire Villanova coaching staff and cross-country team.

"I really liked the coaches," Powell said. "The guys on the team were super nice. Good school, good program. I just can't wait."

But he knows the Bulldog program is in really good hands. Losing Powell and Keeble will be tough, but tons of freshmen were forced into action this year, and they responded to the challenge.

"Even though we weren't as successful as the past few years, I'm so proud of those guys," Powell said. "We had a really young team. We had 11 freshmen on a 16-man roster. They all stepped up. They did so, so well. Coach Garrison could have easily marked this off as a rebuilding year because we had to replace so many guys."

"At the end of the season, we had two seniors who were healthy, no juniors who were healthy and one sophomore who was healthy. Easily from Day 1, he could have written this off as a rebuilding year, but he totally revamped our training to help out the freshmen."

Freshman, Kyle Nofziger missed competing for state by just five seconds at the sectionals. Joseph Scheele, Jonah Singer and Josh Wilcoski also were forced to compete in intimidating varsity meets.

"Kyle Nofziger, that's going to be a big name in two or three years," Powell said. "He's also got two freshmen who ran with him, neck and neck. Joseph Scheele and Jonah Singer, who had some absolutely stellar performances throughout the season. They helped our team out so much. It's a lot of pressure, coming into a program coming off two state titles, and running varsity at huge meets and in the state series. I never had to deal with that as a freshman. I couldn't imagine how freaked out I would have been if I had to do what they did, but they handled it really, really well."

Walmer was that older voice that guided Powell on track, and without that encouraging word Powell could've missed out on some of the best experiences of his life. Powell has passed that mentorship to the younger Bulldog runners.

"These guys are the future," Powell said. "They got some great experience, and they've got a great coach and great training partners. I have no doubt that the program will be right back to where it needs to be in the next few years."

In a couple years, Nofziger, Scheele, Singer and Wilcoski will likely have a chance to run for a state championship.

Powell will likely be waiting at the finish line for them, rooting that they'll break all of his records.