

Cherokee boys repeat as 4x800 gold medalists at 2023 Meet of Champions

Published; June 15, 2023

BY: Corey Annan, NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Returning all their runners from last year's gold medal relay, Cherokee knew they had a good shot of winning another state title in the 4x800 at the Meet of Champions this spring.

Unfortunately for them, injuries derailed their hopes of capturing a state title at the indoor Meet of Champions this past winter. Feeling like the underdog coming into this year's Meet of Champions race, they used that fuel as motivation, and it paid off for them in a big way.

Cherokee's 4x800 will walk away with back-to-back gold medals at the 2023 Meet of Champions. The foursome of **Conor Jacob, Nick Kuenkel, Robert Poplau** and **Patrick Ditmars** clocked in a blazing time of 7:41.17, barely missing out on River Dell's record of 7:40.57 in 2016. Toms River North finished second in 7:43.17, followed by Ridge.

"This title is really special for us because in the winter we had a lot of setbacks," Ditmars said. "A lot of people didn't see us here, but here we are."

Cherokee posted a strong first two legs from Conor Jacob (1:55.74) and Nick Kuenkel (1:56.30) to put them in a commanding lead after the first two legs. Toms River North narrowed the lead after the third leg, but star distance runner Patrick Ditmars pulled through with a strong anchor leg to hold off Toms River North's Teddy Wilson to win the race.

"I couldn't really tell, but I heard everyone saying that the [Toms River North] kid was closing in," Ditmars said. "I wasn't going to let him outkick me. I just put my head down and ran harder."

Despite the absence of Chatham's best foursome in the 4x800, this year's race remained stacked with Cherokee, Toms River North, Westfield, and Ridgewood being the top contenders coming into the race.

Due to injuries in the winter, Ditmars admitted that the group even had some doubts as to if they could pull off back-to-back titles given the setbacks they faced earlier in the year. But once they were able to get their best quartet healthy this spring, their times began to drop throughout the season and their confidence grew.

"We've all been on the same page about this, it's always been no matter who's in it, we're gonna win this," Ditmars said. "No matter if it was the full competition or not, we're still coming out here on top. That was always the goal."