

# Historical race for Cherokee at Meet of Champions

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HOLMDEL. The Cherokee High School boys cross country team rose to the occasion yet again this season at the NJSIAA Meet of Champions Nov. 23 at Holmdel Park here.

The Chiefs placed fourth overall and second only to Haddonfield among South Jersey schools against 20 of the best teams in the state.

“Our race at the state Meet of Champions was a fitting end to our regular season,” said Cherokee coach Steve Shaklee, whose team qualified for the state's top meet after winning its sixth state Group 4 team title in school history a week earlier at the same venue.

“It was a very solid team effort and the result shows it. You have to go back to 2001’s fourth-place finish to find the last time Cherokee made the top four. The last time Cherokee finished higher than fourth was 19 years ago in 2000 when, led by individual runner-up - Marc Pelerin - the team finished a close second behind Christian Brothers Academy.”

Senior captains Ethan Wechsler and Chase Miller led the way for the Chiefs with personal-best efforts on the tough 5,000-meter course.

“Ethan knocked 10 seconds off of his previous best at Holmdel to place fourth in 15:41, becoming the second fastest Cherokee runner ever on the course, just one second behind Shawn Wilson who ran 15:40 to win the state Group 4 Championship in 2012,” said Shaklee.

Miller was Cherokee’s second runner to cross the finish line in 16:18, good for 21st overall in the field of 179 finishers

“Chase knocked 15 seconds off of his time from the state group championships and 11 seconds off of his previous best from last year,” said Shaklee “His time moved Chase to the No. 10 spot on the all-time Cherokee list.”

Behind the Wechsler and Miller, the Chiefs put three runners – senior Tyler Jackson, junior Brett Shea and senior Mike Gavio - between 16:47 and 16:58 to secure the fourth spot, which was just four points in front of West Windsor-Plainsboro North.

“It was the first time in school history that we put five runners under 17 minutes in the same race at Holmdel,” said Shaklee.

Junior Daniel Boria ran “an aggressive race” and held on to finish as Cherokee’s sixth man in 17:29 (120th), the fifth-fastest sixth man of any team on the day.

Junior Nico Grilli, hampered by a persistent hip injury, was the Chiefs’ seventh man in 17:31 (122nd), the third-best seventh man from any team on the day.

“(Assistant) Coach (Jeff) Thompson and I are very proud of this group,” said Shaklee. “They stayed focused and raced tough every time out and, as a result, hit the goals we set going into the year – Burlington County champs, Olympic Conference champs, South Jersey Group 4 sectional champs, Group 4 state champs and strong showings at both the state Meet of Champions (4th) and the Nike Northeast Regional Championships (6th – second best from New Jersey and the top South Jersey team). This group of seniors will certainly be missed!