

NJSIAA Boys X-C: Southern's Braddock wins Group 4, Cherokee captures team title

By Seam Miller, NJ Advance Media

Everyone thought that the NJSIAA Group 4 boys cross-country race Saturday was going to be tight, for both the individual and team titles.

That opinion was proven to be true for both.

When the dust settled on the final race of the afternoon at Holmdel Park, Southern junior Jackson Braddock found a way to win a crowded race, while Cherokee won a tight battle for the Group 4 team crown.

Braddock (15:49) beat out Cherokee's Ethan Wechsler (15:51) to win the gold. Cherry Hill East's Oliver Adler (16:01) finished third.

"It was very competitive out there," Braddock said. "The goal, before time or anything, was just to go for the win. So, I got that done, which is an amazing feeling. I just raced smartly; it was a windy day, so I was hanging out behind them, so they could break the wind.

"I think a race like this is really more tactical, because everyone is so talented, so they can make a move anytime they want. So you really have to be on your toes, and be ready for someone to make a move, and be ready to go at any point.

"I made a few moves. Ethan is a great runner. He was stuck with me a few times. I tried to drop him before we got to that final woods part, but he kept coming back. Then finally, somewhere in that woods part, I just started rolling down the hills, and I lost him."

For Wechsler, though, it was not a lost day; his Cherokee team won its first state title since 2007. The Chiefs (94) beat out Ridge (121) and Cherry Hill East (122) for their seventh state championship. Chase Miller (13th, 16:33), Tyler Jackson (15th, 16:34), Brett Shea (28th, 16:48), and Michael Gavio (54th, 17:05) all helped the Chiefs get to the finish line just ahead of the competition.

"Our objective and our goal for the past few years was to win a state title," Wechsler said. "I remember after my sophomore year, our coach sat us down and told us our

goal for the future. Back in 2017, when we didn't qualify for the Meet of Champions, he told us that this was the goal."

The Chiefs had to wait around to hear the results, after a malfunction on the timing wreaked havoc all afternoon. But for Wechsler and Cherokee, it was well worth it, even after his second-place finish.

"It was just a huge moment for us to win," Wechsler said. "Especially after the results were so hard to find after the race today. We had far from our best race today. We were concerned during our whole cool down. We were just talking about if we won, what the point system was, and how close it could have been. So we were ecstatic to come away with the win today.

My race was OK. It is pretty interesting though. Last year, I won a lot individually, and the team never really won. This year has been the opposite. I have been getting a second quite a lot, like four or five times, which isn't the best. But winning the team stuff is just so much more important and fun for all of us.

We haven't won since 2007. None of us have seen a state title, or even know anyone that did. So it was amazing that we could pull this off today."