

Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year: Cherokee junior Ethan Wechsler

The blueprint to becoming a successful high school athlete is often different for each individual. But for Wechsler, a breakout 2018 season that saw him collect a Group 4 state championship was the result of a Eureka moment two summers earlier.

Ryan Lawrence, Marlton Sun, December 7, 2018

It's not uncommon for high school athletes to experience periods of growth during their four-year careers, or for them to have a Eureka moment, when something clicks and they either decide to stick with a sport or change course and try something else entirely.

Cherokee High School's Ethan Wechsler falls into both of these categories, and his combination of God-given talent and dedication to his craft has quickly catapulted him into the upper echelon of the state's best runners.

Wechsler, a junior on Cherokee's always-strong Cross Country team, won the Group 4 state championship and finished fourth in the NJSIAA Meet of Champions this fall, recording the fastest time by a South Jersey runner in three years in the process. He began to come into his own midway through the season and took that momentum and ran it toward a successful November, taking home some hardware and the distinction of being named **Sun Newspapers 2018 Boys Cross Country Runner of the Year**.

"It's crazy," Wechsler admitted of his meteoric rise in the last two seasons.

Maybe it isn't so crazy when Wechsler relives the actual moment when he was running and the thoughts of how his future might play out were running through his head.

The scene: a summer day in 2017 when a dozen or so Chiefs were out running, preparing for the upcoming fall season, which would be Wechsler's sophomore year.

"I was running with, not the front guys who I should have been running with, but guys who almost didn't care, they were almost seniors, they were like, 'Yeah whatever, we're done,'" he said. "And I was like, 'Ok, this is a point where I can either stick with them and just run and not really get good ... or run with the better guys, the people who are trying to improve, like my friends Chase (Miller) and David (Jackson).' They were running with the front people. And I'd been close to Chase, running-wise, but I was running with the back people. So, I was like, 'OK, I have to run up there.' And so, the rest of the summer I ran with them and it paid off."

Cherokee Cross Country coach Steve Shaklee noticed the difference almost immediately. And then it was difficult for everyone else to ignore it when Wechsler's races steadily improved through his sophomore year in cross country and track, leading up to his breakthrough fall campaign this year.

"He changed the way he approached the sport, really starting from the beginning of last year's cross country, and then through track he just got a lot better, and this year he just upped it again," Shaklee said. "The training has been better, more volume, more intensity, more focus. ... What Ethan has done over the last two years has actually surprised me, based on what I was expecting after his freshman

year. I knew he was going to be a good runner, but he's exceeded my expectations and coach (Jeff) Thompson's expectations. So, it's all good."

It's certainly good, especially when Wechsler's steady improvement has come at the right time for a high school athlete hoping to take his career into college. Wechsler still has plenty of time to continue to boost his resume before that process increases intensity next summer.

He's already laid out goals for the track seasons, hoping to improve his two-mile run while bringing his times down across the board. With a competitive mindset, a growing maturity, and the momentum from his memorable fall season, it'd be foolish to bet against Wechsler.

Maybe it *is* crazy to think it was just a little over a year ago when he was running with the back of the pack. Success can certainly change a young athlete's perspective.

"Freshman year was all about getting to the top of the team, you'd see there were 10, 11 people in front of you and (you're thinking), OK, I have to beat them, so it's like a game," he said. "Now it's all about branching out, who I can beat from other schools, in the state and in the region, and, everyone, whoever the best is in any part of the country."