

Cherokee defends title with 10th sectional crown

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LOGAN TWP. Cherokee successfully defended its team title at the NJSIAA Boys Cross Country Sectional Championships Nov. 14 at the DREAM Park in Gloucester County.

The Chiefs placed its five scoring runners among the top 16 finishers for a 48-point total to best a field of 14 teams in Group 4. Cherokee averaged 16:47 and had a 41-second split between its first and fifth finishers. Cherry Hill East and Southern Regional were second and third, respectively, each with a score of 63.

“We could not be happier with how the team ran at Sectionals,” said Cherokee coach Jeffrey Thompson.

“Looking at those who were returning, we knew that Cherry Hill East was going to be very tough to beat this season, but I can’t say enough about how focused and determined this group of young men was going back to the spring. They chose to work hard each day, even when circumstances dictated that they couldn’t have the benefit of running with others. That same focus and determination was seen as the race unfolded at sectionals - to a man, they ran smart, not getting pulled out too fast, and then ran the last one-and-a-half to two miles with a lot of grit, passing quite a few runners.”

Senior Nico Grilli was the first runner to cross the finish line for the Chiefs, placing third overall behind Southern Regional senior Jackson Braddock (16:03) and Clearview senior Anas Bensaoud (16:25), in 16:28.

Senior Brett Shea was [not] far off Grilli’s pace, coming in five seconds later at sixth place in 16:33.

“Nico and Brett have been great leaders for us this year, and they stepped up yet again at Sectionals,” said Thompson.

Sophomore Patrick Ditmars (16:53) and Senior Dylan Odud (16:54) came in together at 11th and 12th place, respectively.

“Brett and Dylan got better every race this season, and were a dry course away from lifetime personal records,” said Thompson. “Patrick really came through for the team, dropping seven seconds off of his PR on a very messy day.”

Sophomore Conor Jacob was 16th out of 102 runners in 17:06, followed by Freshman Nick Kuenkel (18th; 17:16) and Junior Bradley Popler (36th; 17:44).

Several days of rain, coupled with the fact that the Group 4 boys race was the last of eight on the day, made for a messy, muddy 3.1-mile course at the sectionals.

“Dream Park doesn’t drain very well, so we knew that the course was going to be sloppy,” said Thompson. “We accepted that early in the week, and wanted to have fun in those conditions. The footing deteriorated over the course of the day, and since we were in the eighth of eight races on the course, our times were slowed down a decent amount, but our goal was to race the competition not the watch.”

In a normal year, the Chiefs would be moving on to the State Championships. But the COVID-19 pandemic forced the NJSIAA to cancel all competitions beyond the Sectional level for safety reasons.

“We’re disappointed to not have the chance to compete against the best Group 4 teams in the state, but we understand the circumstances of the year, and are appreciative of the opportunity we had to represent Cherokee High School at the South Jersey Group 4 Championship and come home with the title,” said Thompson. “Doing so, 25 minutes after the girls team won their race made for the perfect day.”

Cherokee’s other South Jersey sectional titles came in 1988 (52 points), 1997 (80), 1998 (61), 1999 (55), 2000 (52), 2007 (52), 2011 (73), 2016 (60) and last year (42).

