

Culmination of a commitment: Cherokee's Ethan Wechsler, Boys XC Athlete of the Year

In the summer before his sophomore season, Wechsler decided to dedicate his time to improving as a runner. Two years later, he's won two state championships (one individual, one team) and earned a scholarship to Syracuse, too.

By **RYAN LAWRENCE**, The Sun Newspapers

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When you follow up a breakout junior season by PR-ing at every course in the fall of your senior season and helping fuel your senior-laden team to the program's first state title in a dozen years, it could be difficult to pinpoint a personal highlight or favorite moment.

Cherokee High School's Ethan Wechsler has had a remarkable two-year run. The Syracuse University-bound runner was a top-five finisher at the NJSIAA Meet of Champions in each of his final two high school seasons.

But Wechsler didn't hesitate to identify the top achievement of his high school career.

"Winning sectionals was fun, winning county and conference we just expected that," Wechsler said. "(But) winning Group 4 states was everything for us. We hadn't won it since 2007. And plus, we didn't have that great of a race."

If the state meet had been scheduled for October, Wechsler would've been as confident as ever in his team. And with good reason: Cherokee had six of the top 10 finishers at the Olympic Conference Championships a week before Halloween.

But heading into the state meet at Holmdel on Nov. 16, the Chiefs weren't at 100 percent.

"I think it shows the commitment everyone still had," said Wechsler, who headed into Thanksgiving preparing for the Nike Northeast Regionals in Wappinger Falls, N.Y., with the hope of competing in Nationals in Oregon this month. "A lot of people would have been like, 'Oh we don't have (this person at 100 percent), so we're just going to give up.' But no one did that."

The pride Wechsler has in his team's ultimate accomplishment is a testament to his leadership and work ethic as a runner in a high school career that is culminating with him earning South Jersey Sports Weekly Boys Cross Country Athlete of the Year for the second straight year.

"(If you would have told me I'd do that) after my freshman year, I would have been like, 'What, I'm like the fifth fastest guy in my own class?'" Wechsler joked.

Wechsler's path from uncertain freshman in a crowded class of talented ninth graders three years ago to finishing fourth at the Meet of Champions in consecutive years (his time this season was 15 seconds faster than last year's finish) is a result of his commitment to the sport. Wechsler decided to take the sport seriously in the summer before his sophomore season.

"Might as well go all in," Wechsler said. "And I try to help a lot of (the younger) kids with that now. Everyone always thinks it's some secret. But there isn't any secret, you just do whatever Shak (Cherokee coach Steve Shaklee) tells you and you'll be fine."

"It's crazy. But I know how much everyone on the team runs, just because I'm around them all the time. Whoever does the most runs, it yields the most success. It's really simple."

With Wechsler and a senior class that includes at least three other athletes that will continue to run in college, Shaklee has some work cut out in molding the next championship Cherokee team. But he also has living, breathing examples of what you can accomplish when you put in the work.

“It’s helpful and it’s something that can help motivate others,” Shaklee said. “I’ve used (Wechsler) already in talking to younger guys on the team. We (just) had a meeting with some of the JV guys, talking about what’s possible and telling them not to set their sights too low. You never know what you can achieve.

“It’s really a matter of what you’re willing to do to get there. Everyone wants to get there. It’s the question of whether you’re the type of person that will do what you have to do to get there. And Ethan was that type of person. He decided he’d do everything.”

Although Wechsler was the runner-up individually in the Group 4 state meet, a year after taking the title, his time this year was more than 26 seconds faster. This was the pattern he followed throughout his senior season, and in his high school career, too. Each year, each race, he’d set new PRs.

As with selecting a most memorable moment, Wechsler again points to the team, the chemistry of his class and collective commitment they made to the team and each other, as a leading factor to his own achievements.

“I don’t think I’ve done a run alone in like three weeks,” Wechsler said. “So we all push each other. If you have six people checking you — ‘Did you run yet? Did you run? — it really gets to you, instead of being self-reliant or only having one person check up on you. ... The team is like family at this point.”

And like any family, Cherokee’s cross country team is actually celebrating Thanksgiving together. Enjoying a holiday feast and reveling in all that Wechsler and his teammates accomplished this fall.

