

History in the making

Despite losing top runners to graduation and COVID challenges, Cherokee's boys and girls ran to South Jersey championships in the same season for the first time in school history.

Ryan Lawrence, November 23, 2020

In a season and preseason filled with starts and stops, Cherokee High School's cross-country teams pushed forward and never looked back.

When the first team practice came late in the summer, as COVID restrictions relaxed, "it felt like Christmas morning," said boys' coach Jeff Thompson. The Chiefs lost a good bit of talent to graduation the previous spring — including four runners who placed in the top 14 at the South Jersey Group 4 meet in 2019 — but Thompson liked the leadership Niko Grilli and Brett Shea were showing off early.

"I don't think they can adequately state what they meant to the team and how great of a job they did in keeping the team organized, in a way that a coach can never do, even under normal circumstances," Thompson said. "In abnormal circumstances, they really were the glue for the team that the coaches could really rely on in the spring and the summer, setting the tone with their training, the way they went about their business and stayed focused and motivated."

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Cherokee's cross-country teams made history in 2020. On Nov. 14, both the girls and boys teams ran their way to sectional titles in the South Jersey Group 4 meet at DREAM Park in Logan Township.

It's the first time in school history that both teams are South Jersey champions in the same season.

"One of the things that made this year so special, for both of us, is neither team came into the season as the favorite," Thompson noted. "We both came in as the underdog. So you have that challenge, and the number of challenges everyone all across the country faced with COVID-19.

"To know that you're doing things that have enabled you to be the best in your region, in your section, is a really great feeling," he added. "And, on my end, to

share that with the others I work with, it's really cool, to see as a program we're going in the same direction."

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On the boys side, Brett Shea said this year's Sectional win was more exciting than last year, when the Chiefs won the Group 4 state championship.

Part of that was because the state meet was somewhat anti-climactic, since a computer snafu caused an hours-long wait to see the results. But it was also because expectations weren't quite the same this year, with three of the top six runners from last year's Sectional meet (and four of the top 14) members of Cherokee's Class of 2020 last summer.

And Cherokee finished second to Cherry Hill East in the Olympic Conference meet just a few weeks before Sectionals.

"The whole season we were preparing for Sectionals," Shea said "The whole time. We want to peak here; we want to peak here. So, we knew we had to take the extra precautions to stay healthy, staying away from people and making that sacrifice with our social life for the greater good. We knew that we wanted to win Sectionals really badly."

Shea finished sixth, behind fellow senior Grilli (third) and in front of sophomore Patrick Ditmars (11th), senior Dylan Odud (12th) sophomore Conor Jacob (16th) and freshman Nick Kuenkel (18th), as Cherokee racked up 48 points to beat East and Southern (both had 63 points) and win back-to-back South Jersey titles for the first time in 20 years.

"It was a great feeling," Shea said. "I came across the line and turned around and I saw our guys pulling in and I actually started tearing up."

"It really showed the hard work we had put out," Grilli added. "Because we knew we were losing a bunch of great guys, but we also knew we had a ton of potential. We formed a great work ethic and (the new runners) worked hard. It meant a lot for all of that to show."