



Pine-Richland's Natalie McLean emerges as favorite in cross country

KEITH BARNES

Tri-State Sports & News Service

OCT 5, 2022

3:30 PM

Natalie McLean finished ninth at the WPIAL Class 3A cross country finals last year and helped Pine-Richland to a runner-up finish behind North Allegheny in the team competition.

But she had some problems when she went to the state championships in Hershey and ended up 40th among the team qualifiers and 84th overall with a time of 20:40.9.

“States was a disaster for her,” Pine-Richland coach Mark Hunkele said. “She was in about 30th with about a quarter-mile to go and she hit a wall. She just jogged in and got passed by about 50 people.”

She revisited the course in Hershey for the first time since that mishap in the PIAA finals two weeks ago for The Foundation Invitational. And what a difference a year makes.

McLean not only improved her time by 2:15, she won the race with a stunning 18:25 as she edged the top returning finisher from the 2021 state finals, Mt. Lebanon junior Logan St. John Kletter, by six seconds.

“Last year before Foundation there was a little bit of an injury, but there was also a shift in training,” McLean said. “I think I had a really good after-track season and I was really confident with what I was doing over the summer.”

As a distance runner during spring track, McLean was fourth in the 1,600-meters with a 5:02.75 and sixth in the 3,200 with an 11:03.57 in the WPIAL Class 3A finals. But she improved to a 4:56.54 and a fifth-place finish in the 1,600 and a 10:37.47 for third place in the 3,200 in the state finals at Shippensburg.

So far, she has parlayed that into a successful beginning to the cross country season.

“She’s a great runner and she had been ever since I started coaching her in the seventh grade,” Hunkele said. “She’s had a great season. She’s a very smart racer and she’s determined to have her best season yet.”

But the senior didn’t make the immediate impact other runners did in the early going. She didn’t run with Pine-Richland in the Red, White and Blue Classic at White Oak Park as Pine-Richland finished 20th in the team competition.

“I had college visits and things like that, which caused me to miss a lot of the big earlier meets,” McLean said. “I wanted to wait a little bit because of that, so I started really late.”

But she certainly made her big meet debut count.

“She had a great strategy in the Foundation Invitational,” Hunkele said. “She just wanted to sit with the top girls in the race, she stayed with the leaders and she had the confidence in the last mile to take the lead and pull away.”

Perhaps the biggest change after winning The Foundation will be going from just another competitor to possible favorite to take home both the WPIAL and PIAA titles.

“I think maybe a little bit, but I don’t think that pressure is going to get to me or anything,” McLean said. “It’s kind of exciting to be able to win an invitational this big, but I definitely just want to continue to have fun with racing and keep an upwards trajectory from here.”

Hampton

Hampton won the first WPIAL Class 2A team title in school history last year and it seems like the boys are gearing up for another run this season.

Over the weekend, the Talbots finished second in the John Sample Invitational at Grove City behind host Grove City, which competes in District 10. Hampton also had the third-place individual finisher in junior Dale Hall.

It’s not surprising. Hampton brought back its top five finishers from last year’s WPIAL titlists.

On the horizon

With the WPIAL finals only three weeks away, teams are gearing up for section finals and a few key meets to prepare for the championships at California (Pa.) University.

Among the first of the key indicator meets will be the Westmoreland County Coaches’ Association Championships, which will be held on Tuesday.

Several key programs are expected to attend, including Greensburg Salem, which has traditionally been among the top Class 2A programs in the WPIAL.

Even so, the biggest test will be on Oct. 20, when the Tri-State Track Coaches’ Association hosts the TSTCA Championship meet at Cal. U. the week prior to the WPIAL championships.

First Published October 5, 2022, 3:30pm