

Venables wears N.J. crown

By GUS OSTRUM • Courier-Post Staff •
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HOLMDEL — Call it a day of surprises -- and a day of fulfilled expectations.

How else can Saturday's 2010 boys' and girls' cross country Meet of Champions races at Holmdel Park be described?

As expected, Highland's Megan Venables capped one of the greatest seasons ever turned in by a South Jersey runner by capturing the Girls' Meet of Champions' crown in 17 minutes, 46 seconds -- the fifth-fastest time in Holmdel Park history.

Her performance highlighted a meet in which South Jersey runners claimed three of the top four spots in the individual race.

Bishop Eustace's Holly Bischof was the surprise runner-up when she sprinted by West Windsor-Plainsboro South's Caroline Kellner at the finish line. Both finished in 18:09. Cherokee's Megan Lacy was fourth, in 18:13.

The Haddonfield boys' team pulled off the day's biggest surprise by taking second in the team championships, just behind Christian Brothers Academy.

In girls' competition, all that was left for Venables -- who set a course record last week when she won the Group 3 state title in 17:28 -- was to capture the Meet of Champions crown. A runner-up for the title in 2009, she performed her task well, pulling far away from the pack 2 miles into the race before cruising to the championship.

"This was a much tougher race than the group championships, and I expected that," Venables said. "Everyone was well prepared, and we pushed each other pretty hard. I just focused on running my race and saving my best for the stretch run."

Bischof, a former soccer standout who switched to cross country last season, had championship aspirations but was thrilled with her second-place finish.

"I had a close finish like this against Molly (McNamara, Red Bank Catholic) last week, but I lost that race," said Bischof, a junior. "But that really

helped me this week."

The Hillsborough (Somerset County) girls repeated as team champion with 95 points. Cherokee was South Jersey's top finisher, in sixth place with 220 points.

On the boys' side, the day belonged to Haddonfield.

The Bulldawgs stunned a talented field to finish a strong second, behind Christian Brothers Academy. Haddonfield, which collected 98 points, to CBA's 68, posted its strongest showing in the Meet of Champions since winning its only crown in 2001.

The assault on the team title centered on the Dawgs' top five finishers -- Ben Potts (sixth, 15:43), Matt Nussbaum (13th, 16:03), Greg Halla (39th, 16:23), Tim Malloy (50th, 16:25) and Ethan Quanci (85th, 17:03).

Those place winners vaulted Haddonfield (98 points) past state powers West Windsor-Plainsboro South (third place, 124), Westfield (fourth, 126) and West Windsor Plainsboro North (fifth, 127) into the runner-up spot.

Haddonfield entered the meet well behind the leaders in average team time recorded in the Nov. 13 state group championships, and was projected to finish between sixth and 10th.

However, the Bulldawgs dropped an average 25 seconds per runner from its Group 2 state championship meet times, which proved to be a huge factor.

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"Tom (assistant coach Tom Brennan) told us before the meet that no one ever gets to the top without pulling off something special," Potts said. "We knew we had the potential to be much better."

Nussbaum, 13th in the race, was pleased with his team's overall effort.

"We've had more talented teams, but we never put it all together like we did today," he said.

As expected, the individual champion was West Windsor-Plainsboro North standout Jim Rosa, who covered the course in 15:15. CBA's Mike Mazzazzaro was a close second, in 15:20, to pace his team's championship run. Livingston star Jeremy Elkain grabbed third in 15:29.

As for other South Jersey runners, Williamstown's Paul Szulewski ran a personal best at Holmdel of 15:55 for eighth place, while Shawnee's Connor Herr placed 10th in 15:58.

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