

Underclassmen helped Chimeras overcome injuries to key runners

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MAPLE SHADE

Would it be the sheer speed of the Willingboro High School girls' track and field team, or the vast depth of Shawnee's

Renegades' much-heralded field crew?

Willingboro or Shawnee? South Jersey's top two-ranked teams met for the first time this season Saturday at the Burlington County Open. And the outcome wasn't exactly the Chimeras' track versus Shawnee's field.

The difference came from a few unlikely sources as Willingboro, ranked No. 1 in the *Courier-Post* Top 20, edged No. 2 Shawnee 106-95. Fifth-ranked Cherokee was third with 70 points.

While Willingboro's Okechi Ogboukiri certainly did her trick on the track (winning the 200, 400 and intermediate hurdles), it was a trio of underclassmen that grew up fast and helped the Chimeras to the county title.

On the track, Chimeras' freshman Marshalee Lindo ran a brilliant first leg of the 4x400. Fellow freshman Zoe Narmah followed shortly with a solid third leg and Willingboro won the event.

In the field, sophomore Natasha Day threw 110 feet, seven inches in the discus, good enough for a fourth-place finish and a crucial four team points.

But the Chimeras young guns certainly made a difference.

"That is big performances



Willingboro's Rhea Mann went on to win the 100-meter hurdles at Saturday's Burlington Open at Maple Shade High School.

by all of them," said Willingboro coach Tosca Bynoe. "They knew what was on the line, and they delivered."

The usual suspects also rose to the occasion, despite a couple of hampering injuries. Halimah Bashir, a senior who first injured her left quadriceps at the Penn Relays last month, re-injured herself in the 400. Still, she endured the pain and earned a second-place finish behind teammate Ogboukiri.

"I felt it right when I started, and I knew it would be a prob-

lem but I didn't know how severe it would be," Bashir said while resting on the trainer's table. "I've been stressing about it for a long time but I know the team needs me."

Bashir didn't run in the 100, 200 or in the 4x400. But her valiant effort in the 400 was good enough for Willingboro.

Like Bashir, freshman standout Brittnee Bynoe has been nursing a slight strain. And like Bashir, Bynoe ran just one event — the 1,600 — and settled for a hard-earned second-

place finish.

"You can't immediately replace a talent like Halimah or Brittnee," the elder Bynoe explained. "But you have to do what's right for the athlete. They're nursing slight strains and we had to account for that. But we're extremely proud of them and the team. There's a lot of character in this program and warriors on our team."

Senior Rhea Mann also put forth a gutsy effort, filling in the gaps for Willingboro in a number of events. In the race of



MICHAEL SCHWARTZ / Courier-Post
Willingboro's Okechi Ogboukiri runs to a first-place finish in the 400-meter dash in Saturday's Burlington County Open at Maple Shade High School.

the day, Mann edged Shawnee's Tabatha Haskins by a hair in the high hurdles. And in the foreign land of the field, where Mann doesn't normally compete, she picked up key points in the triple and long jumps.

"We have a running joke in our program: for three years, we didn't let Rhea play in the sand," Tosca Bynoe said. "This was a huge day for her."

With the clock ticking down on the season and sectionals just a week away, Tosca Bynoe knows the injuries won't necessarily go away. Her job is to fill the holes as best as she can.

"We have one sophomore throwing 120 in the discus and another throwing 35 in the shot," the Willingboro coach said. "Those are areas we can make it up. We'll sit down, go in the war room and see what we can do. We still have a strong enough team and we're not throwing in the towel by any means."

At the midway point of the meet, Willingboro wasn't in first place. Shawnee, thanks to its field crew and a dynamite distance unit, held the early edge.

Kim Bonner and Robin McDowell notched second- and fourth-place finishes in the 3,200. Sophomore Haskins was second in the high hurdles and long jump, and earned a first-place finish in the triple jump.

Later in the afternoon, Danielle O'Reilly kept the Renegades in the hunt with an 11-foot pole vault. The launch tied her own meet record from a year ago.

Cherokee, third in the team standings, enjoyed a great deal of success on the track. At the end of the day, the Chiefs had a trio of first-place finishers.

Malia Lyles won the 3,200, Ariel Brockman took the 100 and freshman Lisa Burkholder finished her brilliant week with a win in the 1,600. On Wednesday, Burkholder won the same event at the Olympic Conference Championships.

"That gave me a lot of confidence that I could compete with the top runners," said Burkholder, whose time Saturday bested her Wednesday win by four seconds. "I was really nervous before, but once I got out there, all the nerves kind of went away."

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