

Cherokee girls pull off stunner

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FRANKLIN TWP. — Assistant coach Mark Jarvis keeps the records. He's not sure about the numbers, could be missing a few meets.

Even without an exact number, you get the idea.

Before yesterday, Cherokee High School's girls cross country team had something like an 0-96 record in school history against district rival Shawnee.

Give or take a few.

"Oh and 100," head coach Chris Tarello said. "That's what we were up against."

Before every meet this year, Tarello told his girls they could beat Shawnee.

After every meet this year, he told them, hey, don't worry about it, you can beat them next time.

But they never did.

Not until the biggest meet yet.

"Our theme for the year was that we were going to throw everything we had at them every

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time we ran them," said Tarello, a 1:54 half-miler for Shawnee in the early 1990s. "If they beat us, they were going to beat us because they're a better team and not because we didn't work hard enough."

Shawnee beat Cherokee in a dual meet. In the South Jersey Open. In the county meet. In the conference meet.

Every time they met — from the fall of 1985 through the conference meet nine days ago — Shawnee came out on top.

Until yesterday.

With three first-year runners in its top five, Cherokee won the first sectional championship in school history, edging Shawnee — the state's second-ranked team — by two points.

"Until they announced it, I didn't believe it," said Amy Domowitch, the only senior in Cherokee's top five. "People were telling us, 'I think you won,' but we weren't going to celebrate

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Cherokee claims sectional crown

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until we heard it. We were pretty sure, but nobody wanted to say anything until it was official."

Sophomore Lisa Burkholder covered Delsea's flat 5,000-meter course in 18:50, junior Megan O'Leary placed seventh, and sophomore Abbey Anderson, Domowitch and freshman Megan Siler ran 15th, 17th and 23rd.

Cherokee, ranked fifth in the state, finished with a 62-64 margin of victory, with No. 7 Toms River East not far back at 73.

"Shawnee's a legend," Domowitch said. "They've been so good for so long, it's easy to think, 'We're not supposed to be on their level, we can't beat them.' Getting over that mental barrier was the toughest thing. But Tarello kept telling us, 'It can happen, it can happen,' and today, it happened."

Shawnee has placed in the top six at the Meet of Champions 13 straight years, winning three times — including last year.

In those 13 years, the Renegades have won six state championships and 12 South Jersey.

Cherokee? Barely had a team before Tarello arrived four years ago.

"My freshman year, we weren't close to them," O'Leary said. "Last year, we started getting closer, and this year we knew we could beat them if we all ran well on the same day. Every week we gave a little more and little more and today we put it all together."

Cherokee is the first South Jersey public school other than Shawnee to win a South Jersey Group 4 title. Ocean County schools — Toms River North and East and Brick — won 13 titles since the meet's inception in 1976 and Paul VI won in 1989, when parochial schools competed at sectionals.

Burkholder is only the fourth county girl to win the Group 4 race, joining three Shawnee girls — Deanna Germano in 1985, Julie Goldstein in 1990 and Liz Moore from 1992 through 1994.

"This is huge," Burkholder said. "Shawnee is what motivates us. If we didn't run against them every weekend, I don't think any of us would be doing this well. They push us in practice. Every time they've beaten us, we've bounced back quickly. We looked at every meet as a new opportunity."

Shawnee and Cherokee will meet again on Saturday in the state Group 4 championships at Holmdel County Park. Also in the mix will be Ridgewood, Old Bridge and Morristown.

Last year, Shawnee lost at sectionals but didn't lose again.

"Most of us went through that, so we know we're capable of doing it," Shawnee's Quinn said. "But it's still a little sad to go through it again."

"We knew Cherokee was good, but I don't think we realized just how good they were. They proved it today."

The difference was the addition of Siler to Cherokee's lineup. This was only the third varsity race of her career, and she ran 20:24, beating Shawnee's fifth runner by two spots.

That was the difference.

"We knew she had a lot of talent," O'Leary said. "It was just a matter of confidence and today she ran the way we knew she's capable of."

Moorestown's streak of six straight titles ended when the Quakers placed second to Ocean City, 38-67. Kate Laramie broke 20 minutes for Moorestown, placing seventh in 19:50.

Maple Shade advanced to states by placing fourth in Group 1. Freshman Lindsay McGonigle led the Wildcats, in eighth place.



BCT staff photo/DENNIS MCDONALD

Cherokee High School's Lisa Burkholder (front) leads the pack during the South Jersey Group 4 race yesterday. Burkholder's first-place finish helped the Chiefs win the sectional crown.

The Cherokee girls cross country team made history on November 8 and they couldn't have picked a better time.

Cherokee had never beaten its rivals from Shawnee. The Renegades have been the dominant team in South Jersey over the years and were the only team in the immediate South Jersey area to win the Group 4 crown.

The Renegades were favored to win another championship at this year's Group 4 meet, but Cherokee was determined to end its misery against its rivals. The Chiefs not only snapped their losing streak against the Renegades, but they also captured their first ever sectional crown. Head coach Chris Tarello couldn't have asked for a better scenario for the losing streak to come to an end.

"I didn't know what I was more excited about," Tarello said. "I didn't know if it was winning the sectional title or ending the losing streak against Shawnee. We would have been thrilled to have been able to do just one of those things. To be able to do both at the same time is almost overwhelming."

It was a total team effort for Cherokee. The Chiefs would not be denied in their biggest meet of the year. Cherokee came up with 62 total team points, which was two points less than second-place Shawnee.

Cherokee's Lisa Burkholder was the first runner to cross the finish line as she came in with a mark of 18:50. Burkholder's time was eight seconds better than Shawnee's Kim Bonner, who was forced to settle for a second-place finish. Those eight seconds made the difference in the meet.

Megan O'Leary also ran a strong race for the Chiefs. O'Leary finished seventh with a time of 19:30. Two other Chiefs also finished in the top 20. Abbey Anderson was 15th with a time of 20:02. Amy Domowitch's run of 20:11 was enough for a 17th-place finish.

Cherokee's success story is even more remarkable considering many of its top runners used to be soccer players. Burkholder, Domowitch and Anderson made the switch from soccer to cross country over the past two seasons.

While the Chiefs had plenty of reason to celebrate, Tarello was quick to tip his hat to the Renegades.

"It's a testament of how strong Shawnee's program is," Tarello said. "They've probably been one of the strongest programs in the nation over the past 20 years. I don't think any team has had the kind of run that they have had. We were the first team from the South Jersey area other than Shawnee to win the sectional meet. All the other teams have been from the shore area."

Cherokee came close to beating Shawnee at the South Jersey open. The Chiefs were in striking distance of the Renegades before Shawnee pulled away in the final mile. The Chiefs found themselves in the same situation at the sectional meet, but Cherokee was able to hold off Shawnee down the stretch to take the title.

"It looked like the same thing may happen again," Tarello said. "We just needed to hold on and finish this race off. They were able to do that and people were coming up to us and congratulating us. I didn't want to get ahead of myself until I knew it was over."

The win was especially satisfying for Tarello. He is a 1992 graduate of Shawnee. However, Tarello is proud of the program he has established at Cherokee.

"It was special because I can understand more than most people what the cross country and track and field programs mean to Shawnee," Tarello said. "It's a very special tradition that they have there. I love my alma mater. I wouldn't be who I am today without Shawnee. But I'm proud to say that the Cherokee program is now at the same level. It's really a validation for us."

The Shawnee streak is over. The Cherokee streak may just be getting started.