

# Cherokee runners glad they made the switch

FRANKLIN TWP. — Anybody who ever thought cross country was an individual sport never met the Cherokee High School girls' team.

The Chiefs are more like two teams.

Amazingly, three of Cherokee's top five runners switched from their school's soccer team to cross country in the last two seasons. The move to retire their cleats and lace up running shoes was the best change of footwear since Michael Jordan put down his baseball spikes and returned to basketball.

Even more amazing, these converts carried the Chiefs to their first championship of any kind in the program's 18-year history on Saturday.

Wait, this gets better. Lisa Burkholder, Amy Domowitch and Abbey Anderson all switched over from soccer to help Cherokee, No. 2 in the *Courier-Post* Top 20, not only win a championship but the South Jersey Group 4 sectionals. And, in doing so, they teamed with senior Megan O'Leary and freshman Megan Siler to beat No. 1-ranked Shawnee, which has won 13 sectional titles to tie Hadonfield for the most in South Jersey history.

These girls who used to kick the soccer ball around are now the first Cherokee team to ever beat Shawnee in any race. Figuring these two Lenape School District rivals meet four to five times a season, well, that's a lot of miles to run on empty.

"This is incredible," Domow

Kevin Callahan



itch said after just two points (62-64) decided the outcome on the Delsea High School course. "I've played sports my whole life, but this is unlike anything I've ever experienced. It's incredible."

It sure is. Even more incredible, Burkholder won the individual title. At this time last year, she was on the Cherokee freshman soccer team.

"I don't know why I didn't do cross country last year," Burkholder said, shaking her head.

The sophomore clocked in at 18 minutes, 50 seconds to hold off Shawnee senior Kim Bonner (18:58) for the top spot. O'Leary finished seventh (19:30), Anderson took 15th (20:02), Domowitch placed 17th (20:11) and Siler came up with the final counting points at 23rd (20:24).

Like Burkholder, Anderson left soccer after her freshman season last year. Domowitch, a senior, was expected to be the Chiefs' starting goalie last year. But after two days of soccer practice, she crossed over to running.

"I think the attitude we have — you can only get from playing team sports," said Domowitch, who was also a good enough athlete to start last year on the

Chiefs' Olympic Conference American Division championship basketball team.

"Not only do we have an attitude that we are going to work hard, but we have the attitude that we are going to beat you."

That has to be how they beat Shawnee's talented pack of long-time runners.

Their fiery attitude was fueled by confidence, too. Cherokee knew its sister school had to be hearing its footsteps because it lost by just 13 points to the Renegades two weeks ago, in the Burlington County Open.

"This is huge for the program," Domowitch said. "The program can only keep getting better."

Shawnee had won 12 straight Group 4 titles before losing to Toms River East last year in the sectionals. The Renegades, however, bounced back and won the Meet of Champions last year. So, they aren't done running yet. Not with the state meet this weekend.

"This isn't to say we are going to beat them from here on — we still have to work hard," Domowitch said, "but this puts Shawnee on our level."

Domowitch and Kate Burkholder, the senior sister of Lisa who switched over from soccer this season, were named co-captains and deserve credit for bringing this collection of soccer players to the top of the running world.

"Incredible," said Kate, the Chiefs' sixth runner, who finished 37th in 21:02. "I could never



CHRIS LUCHALL/Courier-Post  
 Lisa Burkholder of Cherokee (right) gets a hug from teammate Megan O'Leary following the Group 4 girls' race at Delsea.

imagine being a runner and then to be a part of this — it is something I will remember forever."

O'Leary was the only Cherokee runner returning from the Chiefs' top five of last season. And that was from a team that finished fifth in the sectionals.

O'Leary, however, played 11 years of youth soccer, so she, too, had the roundball attitude in her stride.

"This is a team sport," O'Leary said. "You have to do everything for the team."

The Chiefs do everything for the team, too. Lisa and Kate Burkholder might be the only blood sisters, but they all act and care about each other as if they were siblings.

"We do everything together," O'Leary said.

Domowitch said, "We've built a strong bond — the way

this sport is, you have to be close."

Cherokee coach Chris Tarello, a runner and 1992 Shawnee graduate, also believes his former soccer players packed more than endurance into their new sport.

"They all brought very competitive attitudes," Tarello said. "Sometimes, runners can be introverted, but they came with chips on their shoulders. They came in and weren't scared, and they were not going to be intimidated or be pushed around."

It must be noted the Cherokee girls' soccer team is doing just fine, too. The Chiefs, No. 4 in South Jersey by the *Courier-Post*, defeated No. 3 Lenape this week to advance to the semifinals of the Group 4 tournament. Ironically, Cherokee will play No. 1 Shawnee on Monday.

The Chiefs should do well against the Renegades if they bring the same attitude the former Cherokee soccer players did against Shawnee.

After all, they know what it takes to be a team.

And now a champion. "It is more of a team sport than any others because you have to be dedicated and you have to have trust," Anderson said. "If you are not willing to go through hell for your teammates, than you're not even trying."

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