

Cherokee girls remain in role of the chaser

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Before the official results had even been announced, Cherokee coach Chris Tarello was already looking ahead.

It was about 15 minutes after Cherokee High School's girls cross country team had defeated Shawnee by one point to claim the South Jersey Group 4 championship the Renegades had won 12 of the previous 13 years.

And Tarello's message was clear.

If we won, don't let it go to your head.

"I just asked them all to promise me whatever happens, whatever score they announce, get grounded very quickly," Tarello said. "I told them we're still going up to the state meet thinking that we're still chasing Shawnee. They're still the standard. They're still the defending Meet of Champions winners with their top three runners back."

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Shawnee and Cherokee, ranked No. 2 and No. 3 in the state, race again tomorrow at the state Group 4 meet over Holmdel County Park's rolling 5,000-meter course. The showdown is the ninth of 12 races and begins at 1:20 p.m.

Shawnee, one of the most successful girls XC programs in state history, last year won its sixth state title since 1990 and went on to win the Meet of Champions one week later.

Shawnee has finished among the top four in the state Group 4 meet 13 consecutive years. Cherokee, which never even reached the state meet until two years ago, finished 11th in 2001 and sixth last year.

Cherokee's 63-64 win at Delsea last Saturday was the Chiefs' first over Shawnee in nearly 100 meetings.

"That was a big mental barrier, but we can't assume because we beat them once that we're going to beat them again," said Amy Domowitch, the only senior in Cherokee's top five. "We can just as easily lose to them next time. That's why we have to keep doing the things that got us here. We can't take anything for granted."

How close are these two teams?

At sectionals, Cherokee's five scorers averaged 19:47. Shawnee's five were actually faster, averaging 19:44.

In a race with 116 competitors, Cherokee's scorers all finished between first and 23rd and Shawnee's between second and 25th.

Cherokee's five finished in a 94-second pack, Shawnee's in a 95-second pack.

"We know we're capable of coming back and changing the result," Shawnee's Katie Quinn said. "They've been in the back of our minds all year because they've been so close to us every meet, but I think now we really know how good we are and how well we have to run to beat them."

This won't be a two-team race. Ridgewood, Morristown, Old Bridge and Toms River East could also be in the mix.

But Cherokee and Shawnee both have a frontrunner — Cherokee's Lisa Burkholder and Shawnee's Kim Bonner finished first and second at sectionals — and both have been very consistent this fall.

It will take a very good effort to break up a 1-2 Cherokee-Shawnee finish one way or another.

"We can't get a big head," said Burkholder, who like teammates Abby Anderson and Megan Siler is a first-year cross country runner. "We can't be content with winning South Jersey."

"I know Shawnee is going to come back really strong. They want to get us back and I expect them to run even stronger than they did at sectionals."

Also in Cherokee's top seven are junior Megan O'Leary, senior Kate Burkholder and junior Caitlin O'Malley. Junior Darcy Colligan and sophomore Heather Krawiec also ran varsity this fall for the Chiefs.

Shawnee's group also includes senior Robin McDowell (fifth at sectionals), freshman Kim Bier, senior Jacki Clauss and junior Liz Newman. Sophomore Lisa Maneresi and juniors Caitlin Cocco and Jacquelyn Bradley have also run varsity at one point.

"We're going to approach states the same way we've approached every race with Shawnee this year," O'Leary said. "We're going to go after them the same way we always do."