

— Finishing sixth does have its rewards

Emily Keller left for her cooldown last Friday wondering whether this was it, whether her season was over. The Cherokee High School sophomore had finished running the 400 meters at the South Jersey Group 4 sectionals a little while earlier, and when the results of the top six places were announced, her name was not.

That meant Keller must have finished seventh, even though she thought her time of one minute flat was equal to the time of the sixth-place girl, Southern's Carolyn Gray. The Chiefs coaches went to protest, but told Keller to be prepared for a dreaded seventh-place finish.

Why dreaded? Only the top six qualify for states, so if you finish sixth, you run or jump or throw for another week. If you're seventh, you go home empty-handed.

Sixth might not get you much glory. It certainly doesn't get you a high seed in states. But unlike seventh, it gets you something. If you're seventh, you're done for the season. And Keller didn't want to be done.

"I wasn't ready for my season to end then," Keller said.

Luckily for her, it wasn't. Officials quickly ruled that Gray and Keller had tied (they were in different heats, so they couldn't break the tie with a photo finish), meaning both would be competing in Egg Harbor Township this weekend.

"I get 200 meters away (on my cooldown), and my coach comes running up, smiling, saying, 'Yeah, Emily. You made it,'" said Keller, a longtime soccer player who went out for track this winter and ended up liking running so much that she's doing cross country in the fall.

Keller, however, isn't the only Burlington County athlete to experience the joy of sixth. Moorestown sophomore Laura Rhoads has become quite familiar with that position; she was sixth in the long jump last year, and in both the 400 dash and 1,600 relay this year.

And like most of those who finish sixth,

Rhoads is familiar with the waiting game that goes along with it. Last year, she had to wait and see whether officials would let a girl jump who had missed the finals because of a race. Luckily for Rhoads, they didn't.

"There was a shot that she could have beaten me, so I was kind of uneasy until they told me for sure," Rhoads said.

Last Friday, Rhoads waited out the results of a photo finish in the 400 on the infield, and when she found out she nipped a Collingswood girl to grab that sixth spot, she hugged teammate Colleen Hughes.

And the next day, Rhoads, Samantha Wilson, Micha Hendricks and Marguerite Hemmings won the unseeded heat of the relay in 4:17.10, but they didn't know whether that time would be good enough to unseat any of the six

teams in the seeded heat. Turns out Haddonfield ran a 4:20, so the Quakers were in, and the Bulldogs were out.

Shawnee sophomore Katie Murphy knows how it feels to be out. She ran on a Renegades relay team that placed seventh last year.

But this year was different. Murphy long-jumped 16-4½, a personal record, although she wasn't sure whether that placed her fifth, sixth or seventh. So she waited around on the infield for the results to be announced, her heart pounding as she was trying to warm up for her upcoming 400 race.

Murphy still didn't know whether she was going to states when she stepped onto the track, but just before the starting gun was fired, she heard the words she wanted to hear:

In sixth place, from Shawnee, Katie Murphy...

"I didn't know what to do, so I just smiled," Murphy said.

And then she went out and ran 1:01.2, tying her PR in the process.

Sixth isn't always that dramatic, though



Jason Bodnar
Girls Track

FAST TRACKS

■ **TOP 5:** 1. Shawnee, 2. Willingboro, 3. Northern Burlington, 4. Moorestown, 5. Rancocas Valley.

■ **THE OTHER SIXTH-PLACE FINISHERS:** Willingboro junior Hallimah Bashir placed sixth in a lightning-quick Group 3 400-meter dash (all six placewinners were at 57.5 or under) and Pemberton senior Tiffany Alford finished sixth in the Group 3 400 hurdles, but both qualified in two other events. Bashir placed second in both the 100 and 200, while Alford won the high jump and finished fifth in the 100 hurdles ... Northern Burlington senior Kristen Pogorzelski qualified for the Group 2 3,200 with her time of 12:16.8.

■ **WHAT'S NEXT:** The state public school group championships take place 3 p.m. today and 10 a.m. tomorrow at Egg Harbor Township. Shawnee sophomore Abby Campbell (Group 4 high jump) is the only Burlington County athlete who has a chance to defend her 2001 title ... The parochial championships are 9 a.m. tomorrow at Notre Dame.

— although it sure beats seventh.

Cinnaminson's Casey Fischer, sixth in the Group 2 shot put, had a teammate writing down the marks of other throwers. So the Pirates junior knew she qualified for states as soon as her event had finished, although that didn't curb her enthusiasm.

"I came there not thinking I was even going to make it, but once I threw (33-0¾, her personal record), I was pretty sure," Fischer said.

And like those other sixth-place finishers, Fischer has relished the extra week of practice, the extra chance to compete, the simple fact that her season isn't over yet.

Jason Bodnar is a sports writer for the Burlington County Times. His e-mail address is jbodnar@phillyburbs.com