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SPORTS HEADLINES

Girls Cross Country: Shawnee, Yurcho go out champions

By Ed Kenney
BCT sports writer

HOLMDEL - Just moments after his team had finished its last - and most impressive - race of the year, Shawnee High School girls cross country coach Mike Yurcho told his girls that he had just coached his final race.

The 55-year old Yurcho announced his retirement just a few minutes before his team accepted its third Meet of Champions title at Holmdel Park. The Renegades have placed among the top six teams in the MOC for 13 consecutive years.

Perhaps more impressively, Yurcho retires after 20 years of coaching with a 143-meet winning streak that includes seven straight Olympic Conference American Division titles. Two weeks ago, Toms River East snapped his team's 12-year streak of South Jersey Group 4 titles.

The Renegades got one back (and another) on the Raiders with a state Group 4 championship last Saturday and a convincing 15-point victory in yesterday's final race of the year.

"It's like a storybook finish," Yurcho said.

"This team has really come a long way, not just athletically but the way they bonded together as a team. It's been an enjoyable year."

With three of his top four runners returning for next season, one might wonder why Yurcho would choose now to hang up his coaching shoes.

"I had always said that I'd retire once I turned 50," Yurcho said. "Well, I'm 55.

"Actually, last year we lost at states by two points. If we would have won that one, I may have retired then instead."

Yurcho, who plans to coach winter track for at least one more season, received several strong performances yesterday, including that of Kim Bonner, who finished 10th with a time of 19:43.15.

Local Coverage

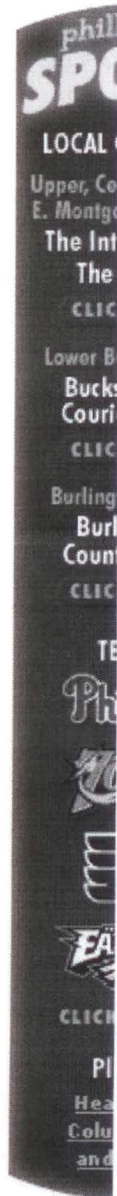
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"Everybody ran fantastic today," said Bonner, who has three top-30 MOC finishes to her credit. "The real heroes of this race were Katie Quinn and Danielle Neukirch. They were great."

Quinn and Neukirch were just two of four Shawnee runners to finish within a 14-second pack. Robin McDowell and Amy Willmott cracked the top 50 to lift the Renegades to the team championship.

"There is a lot of tradition involved in Shawnee cross country," said Quinn, who knocked 13 seconds off last week's time. "But none of us had ever won states or the Meet of Champions. We really wanted to be able to say that we had done that before graduating. Now, the seniors can go out on a winning note. And so can Mr. Yurcho.

"We all knew from last year's states how much every point matters. The other three times we ran against Toms River East, it was only a difference of four or five points. I don't really understand what the difference was today, except that we got some strong performances from everyone."

The key in yesterday's victory for the Renegades was the fact that their fifth runner (Willmott) finished ahead of East's fourth runner. That made up for the fact that the Raiders had three girls place ahead of the Shawnee pack.

"The big thing today is that each girl contributed in the victory," Yurcho said. "Kim is such a tough kid. She's been sick for over a week but she is the type of person that would never let that stop her.

"Katie ran another smart race and the cooler weather has been a big difference for Danielle Neukirch, who has asthma. Then, we have the other girls who keep the pack so tight. It takes more than one good runner to win these types of meets and that's the type of team this is."

Willmott and Megan Fay, who are good enough to be top runners on most other teams, also ran well yesterday.

"We all knew that this means a lot to him (Yurcho)," Fay said. "We were hoping we could give him this before he left."

Cherokee's Malia Lyles, who qualified as an individual finished up an impressive season with a 13th-place finish.

Moorestown's Caroline Hipple (25th) and Meghan Hughes (29th) led the Quakers to a fourth-place finish. Hughes, despite a subpar performance yesterday, will graduate as one of the most distinguished girls runners in county history.

November 24, 2002

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But Yurcho is not discounting the Quakers, last year's Meet of Champions winner.

"We have a lot of respect for them and their program," Yurcho said.

Moorestown has been led by senior Meghan Hughes, juniors Kate Laramie, Caroline Hipple, Kori Shelden and Liz Barlow and freshman Devin O'Connell.

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Also expected to battle for the title will be Toms River East, which finished second to Shawnee last Saturday, and ended Shawnee's streak of 12 straight sectional titles two weeks ago. Toms River East was led by freshman Alison Root and senior Jen Blank last week.

Other team contenders will be Group 3 state champion Middletown South and Group 3 runnerup North Hunterdon along with Group 2 champion Hopewell Valley.

But like last week, the weather could also be a factor. Friday's rain may make for a muddy course again today. But Yurcho knows there's one way to make his team forget about any potential weather woes.

"When you win, and it's all done, you don't even think about the weather," Yurcho said.

Consistent finisher

While Cherokee's Malia Lyles isn't considered by most to be an individual favorite today, her performance this season shows she has a good chance to finish in the top 10.

Her finishes in major meets this season have been second (Olympic Conference), third (Group 4 sectional), fourth (South Jersey Open), fifth (state Group 4 race) and seventh (Shore Coaches Invitational).

For someone who didn't run cross country until last year, when she was an All-South Jersey selection, Lyles is running like a veteran.

"I think I'm competitive, but not outrageously competitive," Lyles said. "I keep it to myself."

Lyles admits the team's long runs, which reached 12 miles earlier this season, have been a big help this season.

"I think it helped a lot with endurance and with everything," she said.

Lyles, who hopes to major in psychology in college, also plans to run in college. She has had interest from Monmouth University and St. John's, among others.

So now, she's glad she chose cross country.

"I really enjoy it," she said. "I get a lot more out of it than in any other sport I've played."

Other South Jersey individuals looking for a good finish today are Ocean City's Brittany Sedberry, Haddonfield's Vanessa Wright, Rancocas Valley's Jackie Dunn and Highland's Kathleen Galan.

Among the individual favorites are Red Bank Regional twins Amanda and Katy Trotter and Passaic Valley's Jesse Mizzone and possibly Hawthorne Christian Academy's Lindsay Van Alstine, who just returned from a foot injury last week.

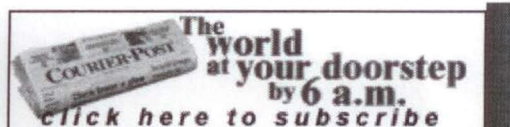
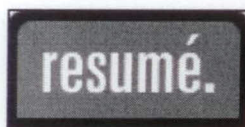
Quote to run by

Most runners know that to do their best, they will have to deal with pain at some point. That's something Roger Bannister said he had to deal with before running the first sub-four minute mile in 1954.

"Few understand the mental agony through which an athlete must pass before he can give his maximum - and how rarely, if he is built such as I, he can give it."

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