

## Fairport girls' track & field team wins the Section V Championship in the last relay

On an odd Thursday night in the middle of the February break around midnight, the Fairport girls' track & field team won the Class A Sectional championships by one point over Rush-Henrietta, 78 to 77 in the last event.

The 200 meter layout in the Gordon Field House on the RIT campus has been the venue in recent years for the most tumultuous clash of the strongest teams in Section V, and this year lived up to that billing. With fourteen teams competing in fifteen events, anything and everything can happen--it usually does and it did on this night!

The coaching staff of head coach Sean Van Laeken along with assistants Ken Schaumberg, Rick Guido, Dave Rappleyea and Mike Van Auken had trained the athletes for a supreme effort, mentally and physically, for this penultimate Section V competition of the 2009-10 season. They trained to be at their very best and defend their 2009 Section V Championship, and they were.

For as much as the unexpected is the rule in sectional competition, the season-long seeding of each event is fairly predictable, and having said that, Fairport expected to have the most athletes earn points to defend their championship: the top four teams predicted to be Fairport, Rush-Henrietta, Hilton, Penfield and Webster Thomas. They were, but the point totals shifted significantly through the six-hour competition.

The coaches of each of the top competing schools had established how many points could be or should be scored by each team throughout the competition, and updating a running tally, the coaches could see how the ebb and flow of the meet would go for each. At times, there was exultation while at other times utter dejection flew in the face as points flowed from one school to the other, sometimes unexpectedly.

By beginning at the end and working to the front of the meet, Mike Szczepanik, the coach from Hilton, summed up so well the way the meet ended: "What a finish in the 4 x 200 meter relay. Who was that anchor leg? She threw the entire team [not just the relay team, but the WHOLE team] right on her back and really stepped up. I couldn't believe it. It's stories like that relay I love seeing. I am sure my kids are sick of the stories I tell them all the time with that same theme—finding that inner strength—stepping up when the team needs you—coming back from adversity—facing the demons inside. That relay had it all. It sends shivers down my spine just thinking about it. I was very impressed with the anchor leg's performance [Lauren Star] and how she should always think back to that moment when down." Mike DeMay, the coach of Rush-Henrietta, walked away in disbelief at the finish of the relay.

What made Lauren Star's performance [only a freshman] all the more noteworthy was this fact: Fairport was up by three points going into the last event, the 4 x 200 meter relay, and RH was in 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the team scoring but the top seed in the event. Fairport had to finish no worse than 2<sup>nd</sup> place to win the meet by one point—a third place would result in defeat.

Each of the first-three legs of the relay ran inspired, each running a season's best—co-captain Julia Sanger, 27.8, Janessa Mathews, 27.4, co-captain Michelle Barnum, 27.9—it came down to the freshman, Lauren Star to complete the come-from-behind triumph. The relay had been in the top three or four throughout most of the race, close but behind. Lauren Star, running aggressively the whole way, found herself in 4<sup>th</sup> place with only 50 meters left but within a few steps of 2<sup>nd</sup>. With five meters left, she was still in 4<sup>th</sup> but closing still. At the finish line, the photo finish showed Fairport with a time of 1:51.97, Franklin with 1:52.01 and Edison, 1:52.02. Fairport won by .04 of a second. To say that Lauren Star carried the team on her back was an understatement. Ironically, moments before the race began, Darren Mathews, one of the officials and dad to Janessa, said, "I have not seen the girls so focused as I see them right now. They know everything is on the line." So that makes the performance of the four all the more remarkable—they had enormous pressure to perform very well, and they came through. Did they ever!

Moving to the beginning and working back in the meet, Ashton Hughes came up "huge" as coach Dave Rappleyea said. Hughes ran personal bests in the 3000m, 10:54.54 for a 3<sup>rd</sup> place. She closed so fast she almost caught Hilton's Amanda Cocchiara at the finish, only .43 of a second behind. Veronica Goodrich, a freshman, finished 16<sup>th</sup> in her first sectional race.

Later, Hughes would run a 2<sup>nd</sup> personal best in the 1500 meters to finish 5<sup>th</sup> in 5:07.02. "When an athlete in the biggest competition of the season, exceeds her seeding, sets a personal best, it is about as good as an athlete can do. So what Ashton did was truly impressive. She is really coming on and has had a wonderful, two-seasons of running," said coach Rick Guido.

The 1000 meters was a pivotal event for Fairport with Rachel Malone and Angie Zaboltny, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> seeds; they finished 3<sup>rd</sup> [Malone, 3:12.86, a personal best] and 5<sup>th</sup> [Zaboltny, 3:13.58] in a very close finish, three finishers within one second, and three place changes in the last few strides. Both Malone and Zaboltny would be the main stays in other events for the team.

The 600 meters would be the most significant event for Fairport in many unimaginable ways: To begin with Lauren Burke, one of the captains, has had a series of injuries to her hip and most recently her foot for the last month. The feeling with the coaches was that she would perform well, possibly bettering her 2<sup>nd</sup> seed position to Savhonna Hinton of Webster, the top seed, but no worse than second. Burke's strategy was to follow closely behind for 300 meters and then take the lead, which she did. The first 200 meters, a crisp 30 seconds, led into the 2<sup>nd</sup> 200 of 32—both runners went through the 400 in 62 and distanced themselves from the field. At the 550 meter point, Burke's lack of training began to show itself as she tighten up but with her unparalleled fortitude and resolve, jaw firmly in place, she willed herself to the finish line some .2 of a second ahead of Hinton. Both runners collapsed onto each other like two pretzels. A number of bystanders, coaches and officials had to peel the two apart, one leg off the other.

What did connect the two was that they ran the two fastest 600 meters in upstate New York this season, and two new school records for each school. Burke ran 1:36.77, which bettered Rosie Roessel's 2008 record of 1:37.96. Michelle Barnum, had the bad luck to find herself in the 2<sup>nd</sup> heat, which she won going away while all the speedsters were racing each other in the faster section. She ran 1:45.67 for 6<sup>th</sup> place.

"All I could think about during the race, and everything else was blocked out [and certainly the injuries], was the team needed the points and I had to deliver," Burke would say later. "Afterwards, I felt like I had never felt before—I guess because of the lack of training. And even twenty minutes later, I still couldn't catch my breath. I felt real bad for a long time," Burke would say. The 55 meters was within twenty minutes of the 600 meters.

And that feeling after the race not only haunted Burke but also the team. She was the 2<sup>nd</sup> seed in the 55 meters and the top seed in the 300 meters, 18 points. When the dust settled, she would earn a 6<sup>th</sup> in the 300 meter dash with her 44. 21 and finish out of the top six in the 55. The others on the team would have to step up, and did they ever! "I knew after my other races the team would have to do their absolute best to score points and keep us even with the other teams; I knew it was going to be very tough on everyone, but I gave everything I had--it was up to them now," Burke would say.

RH, Penfield and Hilton would destroy the field in several events, picking up huge bundles of points while Fairport couldn't score—the 1500 meter race walk—Penfield picked up 16 while RH scored 8 and Hilton 4; in the 55 alone, RH scored 16. In the 300, RH would score 8 points.

"If I had to pick a most valuable performer for us, it would be Emily Renna," said Coach Van Laeken would say. Indeed Emily Renna had a career day, as Coach Mike Van Auker would say. "Emily is very capable, and she came of age today, for sure." Renna, the top seed in the 55 meter hurdles, came through to win handily in a personal best, 8:93 and Janessa Mathews, her hurdle mate, came through with a personal best of 9.24--good for 3<sup>rd</sup>, which was two places better than her seeding. The difference between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> was .03 of a second. Both came through with flying colors, red and blue.

Later, after the crushing changes in the point spread in the 55 meter dash and the 300 for Fairport, both Renna and Mathews would accept the challenge Burke posed, "everyone will have to step up now," and the triple jump mates would answer that challenge with a 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> place. Both with personal bests: Renna would jump an astounding 35' .5" of an inch and Mathews would hop, skip and jump, 34' 1". To make it all the more nerve racking, both were less than a fraction of an inch from being over taken by other jumpers. And any slight change ultimately downward, would have been devastating for the team scoring. Both were not expected to score.

Renna would have a season's best effort in the long jump, 16' 1", which would have been in the top four places in the past two sectional meets, but not this year. Seven inches separated the top nine performers—16' 8" to 16' 1"—and that is where Renna placed. "It is so ironic, and in a way disheartening, to have Emily jump so well, and only finish 9<sup>th</sup>. I just am so surprised. Emily did have a jump, close to 17', that was so close to not being a foul, I am really surprised it was called a foul," Ken Schaumberg, the jumps coach would say. "Emily did well!"

Of all the surprises of the meet, the one, the most amazing performance was turned in by Loren Metzger, the lone shot putter for Fairport. Coming into the Sectional meet, and not in a scoring position this season in any of

the major competitions, Metzger said to Coach Guido the usual repartee the two usually have before meets, "I need you to 'speak' to me so I am on 'motivated and ready' to go." And away she went scoring a personal best of 29' 10-.5", scoring four points, for a huge fourth place! "I am so impressed with Loren; she works alone by herself because we have no other shot putters left at this point, and her coach has been away for months, yet she goes about her business like a professional. She came up so big for her teammates. It is hard not to be so happy for her. She is amazing really," Guido would say.

The two relays, the 4 x 400 meter and the 4 x 800 meter were very important scoring opportunities for Fairport—and with a grouping of many doubling or even tripling, many would be near exhaustion in the relays, but they still gave their absolute best. Jane Rosenthal led off the long relay with a sparkling, and courageous performance. She had to give her team the lead, and she did. Rosenthal ran 2:32.7 and handed off to Rachel Malone with the lead. Malone ran 2:36.7 in her 2<sup>nd</sup> event of the day and ended up in a pack of three. Ashton Hughes ran 3<sup>rd</sup> with a 2:36.2, her 2<sup>nd</sup> event, also keeping her team in the top three. Angie Zabloutny, who really came of age in this meet, as did so many of the girls, ran away from the 3<sup>rd</sup> place team and up to RH's Jodi Robinson. The two ran away from the field, and with Zabloutny's 2:29.4, the gap at the end between the two was one second.

It was a highly competitive race and one all the girls were proud of, justifiably so! The shorter relay, the 4 x 400, was made up of many who ran two events already and the girls, again, gave their absolute best effort: Michelle Barnum ran first with a 64, keeping her team in scoring position; next up would be the star of the 4 x 200 meter relay later at the clutch point of the meet—Lauren Star. She ran 66.1 and Jane Rosenthal, in her 2<sup>nd</sup> event, ran 66.8. The team at this point was fighting for its very life against a very strong field of teams, which had not doubled their athletes yet. Angie Zabloutny, again the anchor, ran 64 to move up in the scoring to 4<sup>th</sup> place. Ironically, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> legs ran 64 while the two middle legs ran 66—the two in the middle were not 400 meter runners while the outside two were—and it was that kind of line-up juggling the coaches had to come up with to utilize the fourteen members of the team for maximum scoring.

Rachel Malone finished 9<sup>th</sup> in the 1500 meters with a 5:20.91; and Emma Dustman ran 3:32.34 for 13<sup>th</sup> in the 1000 meters. Jillian Gueli jumped 4' 4" in the high jump, tied for 7<sup>th</sup>.

The team scoring was close with Fairport totaling 78, Rush-Henrietta, close by in 2<sup>nd</sup> with 77. Penfield had 67, with Hilton 56 and Webster Thomas, 53 in the fourteen-team competition.

**The boys team would finish in 9<sup>th</sup> place with eleven points.** The three scoring events for the team were the 4 x 400 meter relay, the 4 x 200 meter relay and Ulysses Miles in the high jump with a 5<sup>th</sup> place finish, 5' 8".

The 4 x 400 meter relay did have a spectacular day, finished 2<sup>nd</sup> to Edison, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> best performance and time in Section V this season. Ian Steltmann led off with a very competitive 53.2 effort, a personal best indoors. He handed off to the off-injured Peter Larman, who ran a highly inspired and gutsy race through 350 meters—"the last 50 meters was a struggle for sure," he would say later. "The training, or the lack of it, really caught up with me at the end." Larman ran 54.3 and kept his team in 3<sup>rd</sup> place, but close to Edison. Cam Johnson, the soon-to-be-great middle distance runner, ran his usual, highly competitive race and had a personal best 52.9 to tighten the grip on 2<sup>nd</sup>; he moved up to the shoulder of the Edison runner. Justin Green, long used to such highly demanding and nerve-racking anchor legs, ran 53.4. "If I had it to do over again, I would have gone out faster and made my move earlier than I did," he would say to the coaches afterwards. "I waited until the last 50, and I just couldn't pull even at the end." He did run a great race, and the team's 3:34.16 was the fastest Fairport has run in several years. Edison ran less than a second faster for first place. The State Qs race between the two will be a sparkling competition with the two fastest 4 x 400 meter relays in Section V. It will be interesting to see!

The 4 x 200 meter relay was good effort for the boys and good enough to score. "That was very pleasant to see," said Coach Guido. Leading off was Russell Kolker, with 25.5; he handed off to Mike Optis, who ran 25.2, which kept the team in the scoring; Mike Mastro, usually a middle distance runner, stepped down in distance to run 26.1. Ian Steltmann, a middle distance runner by trade, ran a very nice 24.3 to anchor the team to a 1:41.26 and the 6<sup>th</sup> place. Kevin Jablonski finished 9<sup>th</sup> [10:36.05] in the 3200 meters and 13<sup>th</sup> in the 1600 meters [5:07.76]. James Paratore, running a personal best in the 55 meter hurdles, ran 8.86, for 10<sup>th</sup>. The 4 x 800 meter relay team of Simon Ghebrewoldi, Brandon Bachstein, Alex Gilmore, and Peter Stoutz ran 9:02.9 for 7<sup>th</sup> place.

Of all the unexpected events that occurred during the six-hour competition, the one "expected" event that occurred well after midnight was this exchange between Julia Sanger and Michelle Barnum: "Wouldn't it be nice to

take the Championship trophy to Coach Van Auker on Friday?" They did the next day just short of noon, about twelve hours removed from the meet.

Coach Van Auker suffered a stroke as he walked into RIT, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, for an indoor track meet.

The look on Mike's face, meeting six-car loads of the "track family" the next day had such a good feeling to it. What a finish to the Sectional meet.