

Ellinwood girls in search of title; boys return pair of state runners

By MIKE COURSON

A second-place finish at state last October defied expectations for the Lady Eagle cross country team. And a runner-up trophy was the best anyone could hope for against a Bennington team that featured four of the top-25 runners at state and all five scorers in the top-10.

Andrew Cherry, back for a third season, also had two boys qualify for state last fall. Especially on the girls' side, with five returners back from last year's team, expectations remain high for his teams in 2018.

"Our girls team is set to have a great year," Cherry said. "I am very excited about the steps we have taken in our offseason and I think we have a shot to be equally as good as we were last year. Then with a few additions to our team, and hopefully to be healthy for the whole year, makes us better than we were last year.

"I think our girls have their eye on a state title. I know there are a lot of great teams in 2A with those same goals so we have our work cut out for us, but I think with the mindset we have and our ability to work like we do, I think we will be in a position to fight for those top spots at the state meet.

"We are also in line for our 10th-straight regional championship so that will also be on our

minds as we get close to the postseason. I think our girls' team has some high expectations but I think they are up for the challenge."

Not that Bennington is going away. The Lady Bulldogs lose state champion Halle Johnson and seventh-place finisher Karis Hilbert to graduation, but three of the top-10 runners in 2A should be back in Bennington.

Berean Academy will also be a force in 2018. The Lady Warriors finished just one point behind Ellinwood at state last year and return all five scorers from state, including senior Erin Topham, last year's fifth-place finisher.

The Lady Eagles pulled off last year's runner-up feat with no extras in the tank. All five state scorers are back led by sophomore Ashtin Klepper, a third-place regional finisher and eighth-place runner at state.

Four Lady Eagles finished in the top-31 last year at state. Sophomore Erin Hammeke just missed the top-10 in 11th, and seniors Sarah Hammeke and Courtney Cook placed 25th and 31st respectively. That will give Ellinwood a strong core of point at each meet.

Junior Alicia Mitchell picked up the final points at state last year in 83rd overall. Freshman Gracie Schlessiger will be push-

ing for varsity points in her first high school season, and senior Lauren Petz joins the team as a multi-sport varsity athlete in past years.

"I am very excited to have all of my girls back this year," said Cherry. "I am also excited to be able to add a couple of kids who I think will make a pretty good impact. Lauren is a senior who had never run before but plays basketball for me. She is athletic and very fast. I am hoping she will be able to surprise herself and become the runner I think she is capable of becoming.

"Gracie is a freshman that has run for me the last two years and just keeps getting better and better. I am excited about her growth as a runner and hopefully she will be competing for those top-5 scoring spots in every meet."

Joslin, Whisnant return with state experience

After Ellinwood's heyday of three-straight cross country titles on the boys' side, that team has struggled with numbers in recent years. Last fall, the team had just enough to score as a team. The result was a fourth-place finish at regionals to just miss a spot at state.

The team is grounded by a pair of runners who picked up state experience last season.

Senior Peter Joslin ran fifth at regionals and 17th at state to earn All-State honors. Senior Jon Whisnant followed in seventh at regionals and 25th at state. Freshman Kaden Baird is ready to make his varsity debut.

"Our boys team is in a different place," Cherry said. "We had just enough runners to complete a team last year that finished fourth at regionals. We have lost a couple to the football team but bring back our top-2 runners from last year. They are excited to be able to run with each other and see how fast they can get this fall.

"I am really hoping that Peter and Jon really step up their leadership roles and start to develop those younger kids to become great runners. I think if we can get some of those younger runners to see what those older guys do, that will really benefit our team going forward. I am really hoping for a lot of personal records to be set and a good team bond with my boys' team.

With Ellinwood moving back to 11-man football in 2018, the cross country team took some hits as Seth Winget and Jacob Cole make the move to the gridiron.

"I am a little disappointed to have lost a couple of guys off of our team from last year," Cherry said. "Coach Birney is doing a great job of recruiting kids to

play football and got a couple of mine excited about the opportunity to play and they've made the change.

"Kaden is a freshman who has run for me the last two years and I think is bigger and stronger than he ever has been, and I think that strength will really benefit him moving up to the 5K distance. I am hoping for some more additions to our team that will surprise me and help make our boys team a contender for a trip to state."

In all, Cherry is excited about watching a balanced team with several key newcomers and a group of seniors who have put together competitive careers.

"I really am excited to see our kids compete," he said. "I cannot wait to see how fast Ashtin and Erin are going to be this year. I am excited to see the motivation in Sarah, Courtney, Peter, and Jon as seniors and how they want to end their running careers in an Ellinwood uniform. I think with some of the new runners and the excitement of the goals we are trying to reach, my whole team will be a close unit and will continually push each other every day. If we do that we will just keep getting faster and we hope that shows when we race. I am excited about this team and I cannot wait to see what they are going to do."

Ellinwood XC 2018

Aug. 30	@Smoky Valley
Sept. 8	@Wamego
Sept. 13	@Stafford
Sept. 27	@Halstead
Oct. 4	@Sterling
Oct. 11	CPL@ Ness City
Oct. 20	Regionals
Oct. 27	State

Cover story: Lady Eagles going for No. 1 in 2018

By MIKE COURSON

Alicia Mitchell proved to be the wild card on last year's state runner-up cross country team. Without her in the race, the Lady Eagles cannot even compete as a team. If she runs 21 seconds slower, Ellinwood falls to third place behind Berean Academy.

But that second-place team was bolstered by a pair of freshmen and a pair of juniors. Mitchell and all four of those scorers are back to put the Lady Eagles in the driver's seat for another big finish.

So it will be the same team with a new look. In the offseason, Ellinwood High purchased new uniforms. Competitors will quickly get used to the new look.

"I think it's pretty cool because we're going out to our meets and a lot of schools just know who we are," said senior Courtney Cook. "They know we like to win and compete and we're here to make a statement."

Things change after a second-place finish at state. Over the summer, many of the girls ran about 35 miles a week to prepare for the season. Everyone expects EHS to have a target on its back, but Bennington and its three returning state scorers will still carry the biggest target.

"We're not too focused on the people coming after us," said Sarah Hammeke, another senior. "We want to go after the big one



All five scorers from last year's state runner-up team are back for Ellinwood. This year's team is, front row from left: Sarah Hammeke, Courtney Cook, and Lauren Petz. Back row: Erin Hammeke, Gracie Schlessiger, Ashtin Klepper, and Alicia Mitchell. (photo by Mike Courson)

ourselves."

The strategy may also be a little different this year. The team has more or less separated itself into pairs. Sophomores Ashtin Klepper and Erin Hammeke ran eighth and 11th, respectively, at state last year. They'll run together during races. Cook and senior newcomer Lauren Petz will likely stay together during races, and Sarah Hammeke will "be on an island" somewhere in the middle. Freshman Gracie Schlessiger will be in the mix for points, and

Mitchell will also be vying for points.

The girls already have Sept. 8 circled on the calendar. That's the day the seniors head to Wamego for a seventh run in four years. That's also the first time Ellinwood will run against Bennington, though the Lady Eagles will likely not have a full team that day. "It will be nice to see what we can do even if we're not at full strength," Sarah Hammeke said.

"We can place where our girls would be put into

the equation," said Klepper.

Bennington's Halle Johnson, now a runner at Wichita State, won last year's Wamego Invite. Klepper ran fourth, and the Lady Eagles finished third behind 3A schools Norton and TMP. Bennington did not field a full team. The Lady Bulldogs may or may not have a full team at the meet this year.

"We specifically try not to think about Bennington and how good they are, but they do know how to compete against people," Cook said. "They come for business."

Even with hills, the Wamego course is mostly a straight shot without repeated loops. It's a favorite for many of the Lady Eagles. "It definitely has some meaning behind it because it's the state course," said Sarah Hammeke. "We've had some good memories there and maybe some bad ones."

The 2018 season is shaping up to be a special one. The expectations and talent are there, but the younger runners are also hoping to send three seniors out on top. "It's going to be really hard to replace our seniors next year," said Erin Hammeke.

"I feel like there is maybe a little more pressure this year because we have three seniors and they're going to be leaving," Klepper said. "We're going to have to replace them somehow."

Good Luck Area Teams!

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