

Eagle runners seek fourth straight district title

**By Mike Lee
Eagle Contributor**

Ashley Spradley, the sixth-year Goldthwaite head cross country coach, remembers when Jonathan Bartek talked three freshmen classmates into running so he'd have some teammates.

Now seniors, Bartek, along with recruited classmates Brecken Reyes, Clayton Schulze and Wyatt Adams, are three-time district champions as a team. The Eagles -- who received a big boost last year when Connor Bartek, Jonathan's younger brother, entered high school and joined the team -- will be seeking their fourth consecutive district team championship in four years this fall.

"Jonathan Bartek started running back in the seventh grade, but he had to run by himself as an individual," Spradley said. "He recruited Brecken, Clayton and Wyatt to run with him when they were freshmen. I've always been able to count on those four every year as we put a team together. They don't necessarily enjoy practicing, but they enjoy the meets.

"Winning four district championships in four years would be a great way for them to finish their high school careers."

Connor Bartek, as expected, made an immediate impact last year when he joined the team as a freshman. He qualified for the Class 2A UIL state meet and finished 17th in a time of 16 minutes, 45.61 seconds for the three-mile boys' run. Jonathan Bartek also qualified for state last year as a junior and finished 97th in 18:22.32.

"Connor never gets tired," Spradley said of the diminutive runner who has been compared to the Energizer Bunny. "He has to position himself at the front of the pack early in the races because he's taking two or three strides to one stride for the taller runners. If Connor had the stride length of the other runners, he might never lose.

"He's one of the toughest competitors I've ever coached. If it's physically possible, he'll find a way to win."

The Eagles will get another boost this year when freshman Colton Esse joins the varsity team. He and fellow freshman Brennan Reyes didn't have enough other runners to compete as a team in middle school, Spradley said.

"We should have four really strong runners in Connor, Jonathan, Brecken and Colton," Spradley said, noting the top five finishers from each school count toward the team score. "We need a strong fifth runner to emerge among the others. Colton has a chance to be our No. 2 runner behind Connor.

"Potentially, this is the strongest boys' cross country team I've coached here."

If the Eagles win a fourth consecutive district championship, they'll do it in a new district and a new region. The UIL realignment sent Goldthwaite from Region II to Region IV in cross country. Goldthwaite is a member of District 29-2A with San Saba, Mason, Junction, Johnson City, Harper, Center Point and Buda Live Oak. Harper finished 11th in the Class 2A team standings at last year's UIL state meet.

The shift in regions means Goldthwaite will compete at its regional meet in Corpus Christi instead of the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

GHS Girls

The Goldthwaite girls' cross country team must adjust to not having Kylee Medina, a four-time individual state qualifier who graduated in May. The Lady Eagles have a veteran senior group of runners, along with six sophomores and nine freshmen who figure to make an immediate impact.

"Our girls have to get out of the habit of following Kylee," Spradley said. "We're not going to be as strong at the No. 1 position without Kylee, but that's OK. This group may be better as a team because they will run closer together. The gap between our Nos. 2 and 3 runners and our Nos. 3 and 4 runners should be less than it has been."

The veteran seniors include fourth-year varsity runner Jasmine Balencia, along with capable classmates Emma Grebe, Taylor Rountree and Kelly Ables. Junior Maggie Tupin has made her mark as a competitor and hard worker.

"With the seniors, it's not just about whether they make the varsity team or run on the JV," Spradley said. "They can push the others and make them better. Along the way, they may improve enough themselves to make the varsity."

The sophomore group is led by Avery Graves, last year's No. 2 runner behind Medina. Other sophomores include Annie Grebe, Jaycie Chapman, Britni Roberts, Makayla Miles and Jenna Fincher.

The freshmen bring middle school district championships and high expectations to the high school level. Rani House, Abbey Patrick and Hope Hermesmeier lead the freshmen, and Lainey Jernigan hopes to make an impact after missing both of her middle school cross country seasons with injuries. Other freshmen include Clarissa Mendoza, Amaya Cabrera, Lainey Leverett, Kaylyn Owen and Merry Hayes-Gates.

"Like last year's senior class that we lost, our incoming freshmen are so competitive with each

other. The difference is there are more numbers with these freshmen," Spradley said. "Overall, this year's team will have more depth than we've had in recent years.

"The freshmen went to the state meet and watched Kylee run. They know what the competition is like at that level."

The Goldthwaite varsity girls have finished second at their district meet the last five years -- three times to Hamilton and twice to Meridian. The move to District 29-2A and Region IV will provide an even tougher challenge. District 29-2A members San Saba, Harper and Mason finished third, seventh and 11th, respectively, in the Class 2A girls' team standings at last year's UIL state meet. In addition to Goldthwaite, District 29-2A also includes Junction, Johnson City, Center Point and Buda Live Oak.

"It's good that we have a tough district," Spradley said. "This group needs the toughest competition they can get. That kind of competition only makes you better, and we'll see a lot of these same teams in the other sports as well."

GOLDTHWAITE CROSS COUNTRY

Girls Varsity Candidates

Seniors – Jasmine Balencia, Kelly Ables, Emma Grebe, Taylor Rountree, Elle Petersen.

Junior – Maggie Tupin.

Sophomores – Avery Graves, Makayla Miles, Annie Grebe, Jenna Fincher, Britni Roberts, Jaycie Chapman.

Freshmen – Lainey Jernigan, Abbey Patrick, Hope Hermesmeier, Rani House, Clarissa Mendoza, Amaya Cabrera, Lainey Leverett, Kaylyn Owen, Merry Hayes-Gates.

BOYS PRESEASON ROSTER

Seniors – Jonathan Bartek, Brecken Reyes, Clayton Schulze, Wyatt Adams.

Sophomores – Connor Bartek, Miguel Martinez.
Freshmen – Colton Esse, Brennan Reyes.

2020 TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Subject to change

Sept. 12 – Super Luke 5K, Goldthwaite

Sept. 16 – Cross Plains Tri-Meet.

Sept. 30 – Christoval Invitational.

Oct. 7 – Goldthwaite Invitational.

Oct. 13 – San Saba Invitational.

Oct. 22 – Moody Invitational.

Oct. 27 – District 29-2A Meet, San Saba.

Oct. 28 – Jim Ned Invitational, Tuscola.

Nov. 5 – TBD.

Nov. 23 – Region IV-2A Meet, Corpus Christi.

Dec. 5 – UIL State Meet, Round Rock.