



Loss of stars likely just a hiccup for Lady Raiders

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Walton surprised everybody - especially itself - when the Lady Raiders finished second in Class AAAAA at the Cobb County cross country meet in 2007.

Despite losing its two top runners from last year, Walton appears ready to maintain its standing in the top tier of teams in the state's highest classification.

Walton wasn't expected to be a state contender last year after going most of the year without top runner Leila Norman, who was out with a stress fracture, and having to rely on a group of young and inexperienced runners.

However, with the return of Norman late in the season and the rapid development of its young runners, Walton stepped up a notch at the end with a Region 6AAAAA title and runner-up finish at the Class AAAAA state meet.

"It was an interesting year last year," Walton coach Tom Williams said. "We didn't have Leila Norman for most of the year and we didn't have a lot of experience, but the kids came through."

Walton enters the 2008 season without Norman, a three-time Marietta Daily Journal/Cobb County Runner of the Year, who closed out her outstanding prep career with a sixth-place finish at state.

The Lady Raiders also will be without graduated senior Stefanie Hush, who emerged as a standout in her first and only year of high school cross country with a 10th-place finish at state.

Despite the losses of Norman and Hush, Walton still has a strong group of young runners who played a big role in the Lady Raiders' second-place finish of a year ago.

"The other girls didn't have Leila to lead the way for most of the year and they had to step up," Williams said. "They want to get back on the podium (at the state meet) this year and they've been working hard during the summer to achieve that goal."

For the Walton runners, last year's success is a strong motivating factor this season.

"It makes us want to do better this year," Walton senior Aly Smith said.

Junior Kylie Womack is among the returning runners who will step up to take the lead for Walton in 2008. Womack finished 15th at the state meet with a time of 19:54.53.

"Kylie had a very good track season in the spring and she should have a strong cross country season," Williams said.

The Lady Raiders will also be boosted by the return of sophomore Mara Canning, who finished 18th at state (20:06.27), and junior Lena Hamvas, a 20th-place state finisher (20:08.25).



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Walton has a couple of strong seniors in Smith and Corey English, while sophomore Ellen Jackson and junior Caroline Sullivan are expected to round out the top seven.

The Lady Raiders also have a promising group of freshmen waiting in the wings in Nyna Cutler, Jordan Rapowitz and Maddie Seiloff.

"We have a lot of strong freshmen," English said. "They've been working hard this summer and they're going to help us a lot."

Matching last year's second-place state finish won't be easy for Walton with Collins Hill the clear favorite to win a sixth straight Class AAAAA state title, and teams like North Gwinnett, Parkview and Brookwood also expecting to contend for top-five spots.

But Williams is confident of his Lady Raiders' prospects in 2008.

"We have the talent - we just have to put all the pieces together," Williams said. "We're certainly capable of a top-four finish at state"