



State meet offers surprise finishes

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CARROLLTON - Walton's boys cross country team found itself in a familiar place - on the podium with a top-four finish at the state meet.

The Raiders re-established themselves as one of the elite programs in the state with a third-place finish in the Class AAAAA boys team standings Saturday at the state championships.

It was not as good of a day for Marietta's boys, who came into the state meet as a top-five contender, but failed to even place in the team standings after three of their top runners - including county champion Obiandu Igwe - failed to complete the race.

Mark Hirons was the lone bright spot for Marietta finishing with a fourth-place time of 16:11.27 in the AAAAA race. Hirons was also the top individual from Cobb County.

While Walton, coming off a Region 6AAAAA championship, was expected to finish once again in the top-10, the Raiders were considered a bit of a longshot to finish among the top four teams and make it back to the podium at the awards ceremony.

But with two runners in the top-20 - Will Bryfcysnski (16:31.63) in 12th and Philip Laskey (16:43.36) 16th - Walton finished third with 138 points behind champion Peachtree Ridge (85) and runner-up Collins Hill (99). The Raiders finished ahead of Brookwood (166), last year's runner-up and a favorite to win this year's meet.

"It was kind of a surprise," Walton coach Tom Williams said. "Coming into the meet, we felt like we could finish as high as fifth, but the boys did a great job and they were excited to be on the podium."

While Walton tasted the thrill of victory, Marietta experienced the agony of defeat as a series of freak occurrences plagued the Blue Devils.

Igwe, who was coming off of his runner-up performance at the Region 5AAAAA meet, was within the top 20 when he suddenly passed out with 200 meters remaining in the race, though he was quickly revived and fully recovered.

Marietta also lost key runners Frank Van Valkenburg and Andrew Nelson. Van Valkenburg dropped out after tripping and hurting his ankle at the beginning of the race and Nelson withdrew soon after being elbowed in the stomach.

The loss of the three runners left Marietta with only four runners who crossed the finish line and the Blue Devils found themselves out of the team standings since five finishers are needed for a team to record a score.

"It's just one of those things that happens sometimes in running," Marietta coach Jack Coleman said. "We just had a bad day. The kids will learn from this experience and move on."

Hirons, the 5AAAAA champion, was able to escape the misfortunes that struck his teammates, finishing fourth behind champion Taylor Lord of Chapel Hill (15:48.38), runner-up Brian Detwiller of Parkview (15:58.54) and third-place finisher Niall Longobardi of Peachtree Ridge (16:00.76).

"I think I ran a pretty good race," Hirons said. "For the first mile-and-a-half, I stayed back with the pack and, after that, I made my move and I started to run my own race."

Harrison was the top local finisher in the AAAAA girls contest, finishing fifth with 205 points. Collins Hill scored 19 points to win its sixth straight state title and was followed by North Gwinnett (85), Parkview (170) and Brookwood (172).

Harrison also finished sixth in the boys race, its first top-10 state finish since 2003.

"(Co-coach Jason) Scott and I are ecstatic for both teams," fellow Hoyas coach Kent Simmons said. "We ran a great race (Saturday) and it was a great way to finish the season."

Walton's Kylie Womack led the way among local runners in the AAAAA girls race with an eighth-place finish of 19:30.58.

In the Class AAAA boys race, it was a big day for Hillgrove, which finished fifth behind champion Marist (29), Alexander (118), Lakeside-DeKalb (134) and Heritage (165).

Hillgrove also finished 10th in the AAAA girls race.

It was the first time in Hillgrove's three-year history that its boys and girls teams cracked the top 10 at state.