

## Gower continues success at Walton

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Travis Gower had some big shoes to fill when he took the reigns of the Walton cross country program this year.

Gower had success as coach at McEachern, where he coached 2005 boys state champion Ben Hubers, but taking over a powerhouse Walton program from legendary coach Tom Williams would be a daunting task for anybody.

However, Gower proved that he was up for the task as he led the Walton girls to the Region 6AAAAA title and a fourth-place state finish.

For continuing Walton's tradition of excellence, Gower is the Marietta Daily Journal/Cobb County girls cross country coach of the year.

"I was very happy with our season," Gower said. "We definitely had high expectations and we met them, finishing on the platform at state and winning the region title, so we did what we set out to do."

Gower was not a total newcomer to Walton, having moved over to the school after three years at McEachern to serve as Williams' assistant and heir apparent.

For Gower, his year as Williams' apprentice helped make the coaching transition much smoother.

"It was a huge help," Gower said. "I got to learn a great deal from (Williams) and see this program from the inside. It gave me a good idea about the expectation level and the training program and the whole philosophy of the program."

Gower certainly inherited an enviable situation with a girls team that was returning most of its key runners, including 2008 MDJ girls runner of the year Kylie Womack, from a team that finished a close second to Alpharetta in Region 6AAAAA and was seventh in the state.

While Gower made a few tweaks to Walton's training program, he pretty much maintained the system that had been established by Williams that had helped Walton achieve the success it had on the state level.

"We made a few minor changes in some of the day to day things, but we didn't make any major changes," Gower said. "This is a system that has been very successful for many years and we kept it mainly the way it's always been."

Gower and Walton picked up where they left off from last year from the

beginning as the Lady Raiders finished a strong third at both the Berry Invitational and the Carrollton Invitational, two of the top regular season meets of the year, as well as winning the equally challenging UGA Cross Country Invitational.

"The girls did a great job," Gower said. "We were rotating the lineup around early on and to the credit of the girls, they responded and ran well."

The early season success that Walton enjoyed merely laid the groundwork for the 6AAAAA meet, where the Lady Raiders reclaimed their crown after being edged out by Alpharetta the year before.

"Obviously, our main goal was to win region and finish on the platform at state and we had to take care of region first," Gower said. "It was not a very good day. It was raining and the course was muddy, but the girls fought through it and they made the best of it. It was satisfying to win after finishing second last year."

It was the state meet where Walton saved its best for last as the Lady Raiders ascended the podium with their fourth place finish, propelled by top 20 finishes from Lena Hamvas (12th) and Womack (19th).

"We had five or six strong teams to compete with," Gower said. "North Gwinnett, Collins Hill and Brookwood had all been No. 1 in the state throughout the season and Harrison had gotten the best of us a few times during the season."

We had only six girls, because one of our girls was injured at the start of the race, but those six girls ran well enough to get us on the platform."

While losing Hamvas and Womack, as well as fellow seniors Caroline Sullivan and Morgan Skwira, to graduation, Walton is set to reload instead of rebuild with its usual strong crop of runners.

"We're losing four solid seniors, but we have a large number of really good girls coming back," Gower said. "We will have some good senior leadership, but we will also have some real talented young ones. We should have a real good team again next year."