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Heller, Hunter put one-two punch in Walton team

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Last year, Jay Heller and Corey Hunter played key roles on a Walton boys cross country team that finished second in the state in Class AAAAA.

With the departure of AAAAA individual state champion Sam Bryfczynski, Heller and Hunter are now expected to lead the way for the Raiders in the 2005 season.

The Walton boys are certainly in good hands, with Heller, a junior, and Hunter, a senior, both top-10 finishers in the state, as well as Region 6AAAAA and the county.

Heller finished fourth in the state and third in both 6AAAAA and the county, while Hunter was seventh in the state and fourth in both 6AAAAA and the county.

For Heller and Hunter, being surrounded by so many quality runners like Bryfczynski, Adam Bradley and Stephen Pearl was a key part of their success in 2004.

"Last year, I was lucky enough to be around so many good runners like Sam, Adam and Stephen," Heller said. "It was a very positive environment to be in."

Added Hunter, "Last year, we had a great team. Our top seven runners were all great runners. We were all close, and it was a like a family."

Helping the development of Heller and Hunter was Bryfczynski, who is now a freshman at Clemson.

"Sam was definitely a big influence for me," Hunter said. "He sort of took us under his wing. He definitely helped me focus on improving and being the best I could be."

Added Heller, "Sam was a big motivator for me. He motivated me to always do my best and to be successful."

Heller showed promise from the very beginning, finishing eighth in the county, fifth in Region 5AAAAA and 26th in the state as a freshman in 2003.

It was that impressive debut that convinced Heller to give up basketball and become a full-time cross country runner.

"I played basketball in middle school and my first year in high school," Heller said. "It was a big decision, but I felt I had a big opportunity for success in cross country."

Hunter, also showed promise in his first year of cross country as a sophomore in 2003, as a member of the Walton JV squad.

As a result, Hunter gave up soccer to put his full attention into cross country.

"I was playing soccer at the time and I was initially split, but I thought I could be successful in cross country," Hunter said.

For Walton cross country coach Tom Williams, Heller and Hunter have successfully upheld the high standards that their predecessors such as Bryfczynski and Charlie Dickhaus have set for Walton boys cross country.

"I've been very fortunate to have some quality young men in our cross country program since I've been coaching here and Corey and Jay are definitely among them." Williams said.

Both Heller and Hunter feel confident as they begin the season after training harder than ever before in the offseason.

"I put in more miles than in the past," Heller said. "I had some good workouts and I definitely put in more miles, so I feel very confident. I worked a lot on core strength, so I feel a lot stronger."

Said Hunter, "I increased my mileage from last year. I've pinpointed and focused more on particular aspects of my running and did some fine tuning."

Heller and Hunter found themselves in the top-10 once again, with Heller finishing fifth (16:27) and Hunter seventh (16:40) at a meet in Spartanburg, S.C., the first full cross country meet of the season for Walton, last weekend.

"It was a big field with 473 guys and there were some real good runners, so finishing fifth was a good start," Heller said.

Said Hunter, "I expected a faster time. I could have done better, but it's our first race and it was a good start."

Both Heller and Hunter are expected to be among the top contenders for the Class AAAAA boys individual state title, with McEachern's Ben Huber considered to be the leading contender.

"Contending for the state title is my main goal," Heller said. "Hopefully, I can push Ben Hubers and make it a good race."

Added Hunter, "I want to make it to state and run a good race to the finish."

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