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## Norman enjoying breakthrough year

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Walton's Leila Norman has made a steady rise to the top of Cobb County girls high school cross country in the last two years.

That climb hasn't come easy for Norman, however, as the sophomore battled with an iron deficiency throughout her freshman year and has struggled to master the mental aspect of the sport.

With the iron deficiency already under control, it appears that Norman now has the mental part of running figured out as well.

Norman's breakthrough came at last weekend's Cobb County Championships, where she was the first girls runner to cross the finish line with a time of 19:47 to win her first county title.

Having struggled with self-confidence and mental toughness throughout her brief high school cross country career, Norman found both at the county meet as she came out in front after surviving a tough battle with defending champion Lindsey Pickens of Kennesaw Mountain, who finished second with a time of 20:08.

"It gave me a big boost of confidence," Norman said. "I've had to work to boost my self-confidence and mental toughness, especially since running is like 97% mental. Now, I feel like I trust myself better, and I know I can do it."

Norman emerged as a runner to watch as a freshman in 2004, when she finished 12th in the county (20:51.20), ninth in Region 6AAAAA (20:26) and 20th in the state (20:13.60).

However, Norman's progress was slowed by her iron deficiency, which was caused by a lack of iron in the blood.

"I could have done better last year, but my iron deficiency really affected my performance," Norman said.

Norman has gotten her iron deficiency under control by taking liquid ferritin, an iron supplement, as well as eating red meat three days a week.

She also cut down on her offseason training, running around 250 miles this summer as opposed to the 500-600 miles she put in the previous summer.

"Last year, I put in too much mileage, way too much quantity, so I cut way back," Norman said. "Last year, I ran 500-600 miles and this year I ran 250 miles, more on the side of quality than quantity."

Norman's new-found physical vitality has been evident in her performances so far this season, having taken around a minute off her times from last year.

After starting the season with a third-place finish and a time of 11:43 at the 2-mile Walton Stage Races on Aug. 27, Norman has finished second (19:08.87) at the Eye-Opener Invitational in Spartanburg, S.C., then finished second with a PR of 19:05 at the UTC Invitational in Chattanooga, Tenn. Sept. 10, fifth (19:05.4) at the FSU Invitational Sept. 17 and third (19:49) at the Patriot Invitational in Conyers Sept. 24.

For Norman, her performance at the Cobb County meet has taken her a long way in achieving the self-confidence and mental toughness she had long sought after successfully fighting off a tough challenge from Pickens.

With her new-found mental toughness, Norman believes she can now achieve the times she is capable of.

"I hoped to get down to 18:30 (this season) and I wanted to get down to the 18:10s at county," Norman said. "I've been able to hit these times in practice, but nerves always got in my way when I ran in meets."

Walton coach Tom Williams is impressed with Norman's drive to succeed.

"She's a hard worker," Williams said. "She is determined to be a champion and she wants to be the best she can be and she'll do whatever it takes to accomplish that."

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