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Walton senior girls get one more chance at state

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MARIETTA - For the nine seniors on the Walton girls cross country team, Saturday's Class AAAAA state championships will be the end of an era.

Only three of the seniors - Ellen Black, Anna Day and Sarah Upchurch - will actually be among the seven runners that the Walton girls will line up at the starting line on the 3.1-mile Carrollton High School course.

However, the other six seniors - Molly McDaniel, Alisa Fish, Ansley Wright, Amy Davidson, Emily DeMasters and Katie Young - will be there with their fellow seniors, cheering them and the rest of their teammates.

The state meet will bring an end to the high school careers of the nine seniors who each began their high school careers at Walton in 2002 and make up the largest group of seniors that have spent all four years together in Walton cross country history.

It is a group of seniors who have experienced a great deal of success in their four years at Walton, winning the state championship as freshmen in 2002 as well as three county and region titles.

Walton coach Tom Williams describes his seniors as an unselfish group with a team-first mentality.

"They're a very focused group on friendship and loyalty," Williams said. "They understand what being a team is all about."

Black agrees, adding that they are close off the cross country trail as well as on it.

"We're pretty much close," Black said. "We hang out together away from cross country and we can always count on each other."

Black is one of four co-captains on the girls team, along with fellow seniors Day, McDaniel and Upchurch.

For the Walton seniors, most of the bonding has taken place during summer workouts.

"We train together during the summer and that has brought us close," Day said. "We've spent a lot of time together training without any coaches around and we've really gotten to know each other."

The nine seniors joined a Walton team in 2002 that featured several veteran standouts such as pion Kristen Heffelfinger and Jessica Kerzie.

That year saw the Lady Raiders win the Class AAAAA state team title as well as the county and Region 5AAAAA crowns.

For Upchurch, training with runners like Heffelfinger, who won the Class AAAAA girls state individual title that year, was an educational experience.

"Training with Kristen Heffelfinger was incredible - I never knew anyone who can run like her," Upchurch said. "There were so many good runners on that team and we learned so much from them."

After finishing 12th in the state, second in Region 5AAAAA and fourth in the county in 2003, Walton has won the Region 6AAAAA and county titles and finished second in 2004.

The 2005 season has been more of the same for Walton's seniors as they have helped lead the Lady Raiders to the county and 6AAAAA titles and are a strong contender in Saturday's Class AAAAA state meet.

Now, just as Heffelfinger and company helped them as freshman, this year's Walton seniors are now doing the same as they assume the role of mentors to the younger Lady Raider runners.

"We help out the younger runners like we were helped out when we were younger," Upchurch said. "We try to lead by example through hard work and try to help them get better."

While their time together at Walton is fast coming to an end, Black and the rest of her Walton senior teammates believe their bond will remain long past their high school days.

"We'll definitely stay in touch after we leave Walton," Black said. "We'll always be there for each other."

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