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Walton Stage Races begin cross country season

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GAINESVILLE - It was the first step of a long journey for several of Cobb's high school cross country teams as they kicked off the 2006 season at the Walton Stage Races at Gainesville College on Saturday.

It was a good start to the 2006 season for the Lassiter boys team, with the Trojans (18 points) finishing runner-up to boys champion and defending Class AAAAA state champion Parkview (13) in the meet, which is divided into five 2-mile races called stages.

While pleased with his team's performance, Lassiter coach Ed Hutcherson said they still have a way to go.

"We didn't do as well as it looks like, because Walton held out a couple of its top runners and Parkview held out its No. 1 runner," Hutcherson said. "I'm not disappointed, but we still have a lot of work to do."

The Trojans were led by Drew Jones' first-place finish (10:31) in the Stage 4 race as well as top-ten finishes from Zach Flickinger (fourth, Stage 5, 10:17), Thomas Anderson (third, Stage 3, 10:42), Joe Fulton (fourth, Stage 2, 10:51) and Chris Perry (sixth, Stage 1, 10:54).

Jones, who was the lone Cobb stage winner, edged out Parkview's Josh Pinson to claim the boys Stage 4 title.

"I established a good position at the beginning," Jones said. "Me and the guy from Parkview battled it out at the end. I ran a pretty good race."

Walton finished tied for third with Collins Hill with 29 points each behind Parkview and Lassiter, while Harrison and North Cobb (tied for ninth, 69) were the other Cobb teams in the boys' top 10.

Walton led the way among Cobb teams in the girls standings, finishing fifth with 30 points, while Harrison (32), Lassiter (41) and Pope (65) finished right behind the Lady Raiders.

Like Hutcherson, Walton coach Tom Williams said his team still has a lot of work to do to reach the form that earned the boys a second-place finish in the state in Class AAAAA and the girls a fourth-place AAAAA state placing in 2005.

"The place (in the standings) doesn't bother me, it's August," Walton coach Tom Williams said. "It's a long season and we've got a long way to go."

Defending Class AAAAA girls state champion Collins Hill (7), which won four of the five girls stages, won the girls' team title, with Grayson (20), Parkview (26) and Etowah (27) placing

second through fourth.

With both his boys and girls teams securing top-10 finishes, Harrison coach Kent Simmons was encouraged by the Hoyas' and Lady Hoyas' strong start.

"The boys did really well and ran some good races and the girls ran some good races as well," Simmons said.

Walton's Jay Heller was the top Cobb boys individual finisher in the Stage 5 race, which features the No. 1 runners on each team, placing third behind winner Girma Mecdheso of Berkmar (9:46) and runner-up Austin Enriquez of Starr's Mill (10:02).

It was somewhat of a slow start to the season for Heller, who was the state runner-up in Class AAAAA last year.

"The first mile, I felt good, but I'm used to running 5Ks and I haven't run a 2-mile race since the stage races last year," Heller said. "I have to give my hat to Girma from Berkmar and Austin Enriquez from Starr's Mill, they both ran great races. Hopefully, I can build on this and get better and everything will come together."

In the girls stage five race, Walton's Leila Norman finished second (12:18) behind defending AAAAA state champion Jackie Drouin of Collins Hill (12:11) and ahead of third-place finisher Abby Self of Grayson.

"I felt really strong," Norman said. "I tried to stay with Jackie and Abby and I was able to do that."

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