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Print Page

Norman holds off charge to take first

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CANTON - Walton's Leila Norman shook off an early challenge from Etowah freshman Emily McNutt and pulled away to a decisive victory in the girls race at the Warpath Invitational at Boling Park on Saturday.

Norman's win helped Walton claim the team title with 30 points, with McNutt's Etowah squad finishing second (97) and Lovett third (127).

Walton was nearly as successful in the boys race, with the Raiders finishing runner-up with 52 points to champion Chapel Hill (34).

It was also a big day for Wheeler's Matt Cleaver, who finished third in the boys race with a time of 16:36, placing behind Chapel Hill runners Taylor Lord (16:22) and Chase Eldredge (16:32).

Norman led the entire race, but faced a stiff early challenge from McNutt, who stayed right behind Norman before the Walton junior picked up the pace at the 2-mile mark and coasted to the win with a time of 19:09 on the fast 5K (3.1 miles) course.

"I knew (McNutt) was there, because I heard people shouting 'Go Emily', but then after the second mile, I didn't hear anyone shout 'Go Emily' anymore," Norman said.

McNutt eventually fell back to fifth place, finishing with a time of 19:39 to place behind Norman, runner-up Caroline Kirk of Blessed Trinity (19:27), third-place finisher Geales Goodwin of Northview (19:34) and fourth-place finisher Abbie Robinson of Chapel Hill (19:38).

"I started out strong and I ran with (Norman) for about the first two miles, then I fell back a little bit and she kept on going," McNutt said.

Norman was one of five Walton girls in the girls individual top 20 standings, with Morgan Skwira finishing seventh (20:19), Lena Hamvas eighth (20:01), Katelyn Theiler 11th (20:37) and Kylie Womack 15th (20:46).

Walton coach Tom Williams was encouraged by how his girls' squad handled the fast pace of the race.

"I was very pleased with the girls because the field went out fairly fast and we haven't had anything to prepare us for that fast a pace so far this season," Williams said. "I'm pleased with how they handled the experience and they did a good job moving up after the second mile."

The Walton boys, who were holding out senior standout Jay Heller, had their share of top finishes in the boys individual standings with six runners in the top 20, with Thomas Pilliod

finishing fifth (16:47), Mark Vigliotti eighth (16:57.46), Justin Kerzie 10th (17:13), Daniel Heller 14th (17:19.64), Nathan Gordon 15th (17:19.61) and Will Bryfczynski 20th (17:25).

Wheeler's Cleaver spent most of the boys' race in fifth or sixth place before a late surge after the two-mile mark moved the junior up to third.

While Cleaver, who has a PR of 16:29, didn't quite match his target time, he was still pleased with his effort.

"My goal was to get a 16:15, but I ran as hard as I could," Cleaver said. "I felt really strong after the second mile and I just took off."

Wheeler coach Jeff Townsend believes Cleaver is on track to being a major factor at both the Region 6AAAAA and state meets.

"His goal is to finish in the top 10 at state," Townsend said. "He's got some work to do to achieve that goal, but he has a great work ethic and a huge, huge heart, so he's willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goal and he has a chance to do it."

Walker's Katherine Ouidin and Wheeler's Courtney Meadors were the other Cobb finishers in the girls top 20, with Ouidin finishing 17th (20:52) and Meadors 18th (20:53), while Sprayberry's Alex Hudson finished 18th in the boys race (17:22).

Sprayberry was the only other top 10 girls team, with the Lady Yellow Jackets finishing 10th (337).

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