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Scholastic Spotlight

Combined teams make fast friends of former rivals

Budgets forcing teams to merge.

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Finding strength in numbers are members of the combined Allegany-Limestone and Olean track team, from left: Matt Allen (Olean), Kylee Wilber (A-L), Summer Sawaya (Olean), Mitch Wilber (A-L), Samantha Huseltein (Olean) and Ashley Petersen (A-L).

Photo by Mark Mulville / Buffalo News

FREDONIA -- It wasn't unusual that Matt Allen of Olean won the pole vault at last week's Western New York Relays. Watching him do it in an Allegany-Limestone uniform was.

The current WNY leader in the pole vault is one of 20 Olean athletes who represent Allegany-Limestone as part of a combined indoor track team in Section VI. Allen's indoor track career was nearly no-heighted when the Huskies' indoor track program was cut from the budget two years ago, so combining with neighboring Allegany-

Limestone gave him an avenue to compete.

With local and state budgets shrinking, combined teams are becoming more common.

Southwestern and Maple Grove play as one in a WNY Club hockey team, Pine Valley and Frewsburg join forces in boys swimming and the Monsignor Martin girls hockey team has players from six different Catholic schools.

In the case of Allegany-Limestone and Olean, they are fierce competitors in CCAA I and are a mere 4.59 miles apart.

Now in his second season, Allen said he discovered he was more alike than different from the other athletes at Allegany-Limestone, but did admit that wearing their dark green uniform "was a little rough."

"We used to be like really big rivals, but it's kind of died and we're all pretty good friends now. It was weird at first, but it got better," he said.

Allen has already cleared the height he needs to qualify for the state meet in the pole vault. He just needs to finish among the top three at the Section VI Championships to punch his ticket. His height of 13 feet is No. 1 in Western New York.

The number of athletes from both schools is about even as Allegany-Limestone has 21. That makes for plenty of competition from within the team for spots on relay teams and in the field events.

"It's a situation where we can help them and they can help us," said Allegany-Limestone coach Mike Wilber. "This has kind of blossomed into something that's really positive for both schools. The day we hand out uniforms there's always some comment, 'do we have to?' but it's all in good humor."

Social networking and growing up playing on the same club and travel teams also make today's combined teams an interesting dynamic.

Allegany-Limestone junior Ashley Petersen is the school record holder and the Western New York leader in the high jump at 5-7. When she's playing soccer against Olean in the fall, she wants the "W", but that feeling disappears when the season changes to indoor track.

"All of us are actually really close," she said. "Within the first three days we became a big family. It's the best team I ever joined. [We use] Facebook and text each other. Our communication is great between both teams."

Allegany-Limestone/Olean will compete next in the Varsity Team Challenge on Saturday at Fredonia State starting at 9 a.m.

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