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Hornberger fresh face of track

Lake Shore freshman competing in third states

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Coach Chuck Kowalski checks his teacher's mailbox each morning in the main office at Lake Shore and finds the typical stuff: sticky notes, memos, catalogs, junk mail. Lately, he's been finding something not so typical:

Lake Shore freshman TJ Hornberger is one of many young runners who has had a breakout season. Photo by Mark Mulville / Buffalo News

Letters from colleges inquiring about TJ Hornberger, a distance runner on his track team, who's a mere freshman.

"It's so shocking to see he's attracting the attention of colleges at his [grade] level," said Kowalski, a social studies teacher at the Middle School. "Every meet we go to he finishes the races, usually winning, and other coaches ask me when he's graduating. When I tell them he's a freshman, they can't believe it. Is he a true freshman?"

Hornberger had people asking the same thing last weekend at the Section VI Track and Field Championships at Strider Field in Jamestown. He won the 3,200 meters in a personal record 9:42.80, passing a field of upperclassmen along the way.

"He's absolutely a one-of-a-kind athlete. He'll finish his event and then he stands there and he's not even out of breath," said Lake Shore Athletic Director Daryl Besant.

Hornberger was born two months premature and weighed just three pounds, eight ounces. His mother remembers holding him in the palm of her hand. Today he's 5-feet-9, 148 pounds and knows how to carry his weight around a track.

He was an average middle school soccer player for Lake Shore when he dropped the ball and switched to cross-country. He's been off and running ever since.

He qualified for states last fall in cross-country, and went to indoor states this winter. He'll complete the three-state-meets-in-one-year trifecta this weekend when he runs in the New York State Track and Field Championships at Caledonia-Mumford. He enters states undefeated in the 3,200.

Kowalski said Hornberger has earned the respect of the upperclassmen on his team even though he beats them on a daily basis.

"He works so hard at practice the other kids look up to him. He's such a humble kid so it works out," he said. "The kids feed off him and he inspires our seniors. TJ's got a lot of speed. He can run anything. He just loves being out there."

Youngsters make grade

There was a time when the most encouraging words an underclassman would hear were: "you'll get your chance," or "you have to pay your dues." Hornberger is just one of several young athletes who are making the case that their time is now.

The Section VI meet provided a perfect example of a youth movement in town. Of the 64 Section VI champions crowned among boys and girls, only 24 were seniors: six in Division I boys, eight in Division II boys, four in Division I girls and six in Division II girls.

Consider:

- Sophomore Kalen Sullivan of West Seneca West will represent the section in the 1,600 and 800 at states.
- Freshman Bobby Liebel of Tonawanda won the Division II 400 meters.
- Freshman McKenzie Kuehlewind of Lancaster won the girls Division I shot put.
- The Lancaster and Amherst girls won relays with just one senior in the foursome.
- Eighth grader McKenna Maycock won the Division II 400 for Randolph.

"The key is will they come back? It's a true test of an athlete, and probably their program as well, if they're there year in and year out," said Section VI girls chairman Walt McLaughlin. "The smaller schools tend to have younger runners, it's just one of those things. It's a numbers game too.

"Sometimes you have to draw on younger runners to fill spots. At the bigger schools you'll see more of those kids in the modified programs."

Fields on track

Ashley Fields is hoping her back problems are behind her.

The Amherst senior comes into her last track meet as a high school athlete looking to win the state title in the Division I 200 meters for the third year in a row. She will also anchor the Tigers' 1,600 relay.

Fields wanted to run the 100, but said she thought it would be too much stress on her lower back, which she is nursing after being involved in a minor car accident last month.

"At first I was a little disappointed that I couldn't run it," she said. "I'm not supposed to be in a bent-over position, so running one [event] would be better than hurting my back even more. Coming out of the blocks, that's a lot of pressure on your back."

Fields ran the 200 and 1,600 relay at sectionals and said her back stiffened after the 200, but felt fine after the relay. She said the key is ice and stretching. On a scale of 1-10, she said her back is a 7 or 8.

Fields and Emily Irish-Ryan return from the 1,600 relay that broke the Section VI record at last year's state meet, clocking a 4:54.00. Fields is looking forward to mentoring the two freshmen who complete the relay: Amina Lewis and Josette Dawson.

Fields will run for Baylor University next season. She said she has not been in communication with her future coaches since her accident.

Fields will end her career as the Section VI record holder in the 100 (11.76), 200 (23.66), the 400 relay and 1,600 relay.

Junior Kala Allen of Williamsville East is another returning state champion, having won the Division I 400 meters. She's also the Section VI record holder in the event at 54.61. Like last year, she's taking on a heavy load at states, running the 100, 200 and 400.

Kelly Truppo of Alden looks to repeat as Division II champion in the pole vault. She won it clearing 12 feet last year and has a season-best 12-6 this year.

Maryvale's Mikayla Pearce was state runner-up last year in the Division II long jump and third in the triple.

Among the boys, Brandon Joyce of Niagara Falls was state runner-up in the Division I high jump while Matt Allen of Olean (pole vault) and Chad Maloy of Springville (steeplechase) placed third in Division II.

Lynch on the fast track

There was some more good news for St. Francis junior Akeel Lynch as he prepares for states. Track coach Steve Otremba reports that the league's top sprinter was offered a football scholarship by Duke University last week. Lynch has other offers from UB, Syracuse and UConn.

"The times he's run this spring, schools know the type of level he can play at. He has all the physical and academic tools," said Otremba. "This guy, to get the opportunities he's getting, it's what we're all about, and he's making the most of it. It's nice to know you have choices."

Lynch was the MVP of this year's Carl J. Roesch Memorial at Clarence.

St., Francis, St. Mary's, Immaculata, Mt. St. Mary and Nichols will send athletes to the Federation portion of the state meet Saturday.

At the recent Catholic states, Lynch ran a school record 22.34 to qualify in the 200. He ran a 10.92 in the 100-meter semifinal, but in the finals he lost in a photo finish as his 11.044 was just behind an 11.042 by an athlete from NYC-Xavier.

"We'll see what kind of noise he can make if he's focusing on one event. That can be an advantage," said Otremba. "He's been steadily improving in the 200."

Junior Malayah White of Mt. St. Mary will run in the 100 and 200 and Gabby Leo of Immaculata will be tested in the 1,500 and will anchor the 3,200 relay.

Around the tracks

The New York State Championships couldn't be any closer to Buffalo this year unless they were actually in Buffalo. Caledonia is approximately 62 miles from Buffalo, situated 14 miles from Henrietta.

The meet starts Friday at 12:30 p.m. and Saturday at 10 a.m. Section VI will send 63 boys and 71 girls to participate. Among them are eight girls and four boys from East Aurora. The Blue Devils could have gone for individual event qualifiers, but instead loaded up in the 3,200 relay and advanced thanks to Alex Weberg, Brendan Keany, Kevin O'Connor and Larkin Bohanan.

Representing East Aurora are Marta McLaughlin in the 800, Sarah Ansett in the 1,500 and Megan Hulton in the 3,000 along with its 1,600 and 3,200 relays. Its 1,600 relay dropped six seconds from its previous best time at Sectionals, running a 4:03, along with Section champ Falconer.

Grand Island is sending an impressive contingent. Matt Killian (400 hurdles), Derek Geiger (steeplechase) and Alex Brown (high jump) qualified individually while the boys 3,200 relay is on the bus with Geiger, Nick Masiello, Brendon Lutnick and Chris Meyer.

Look for Sweet Home's Wayne Gordon to put the heartbreak of last year's DQ in the 100 to rest. Gordon won the 100 and 200 convincingly at Sectionals and appears to be peaking at the right time.

The only runner from the Buffalo Public School's Scalp and Blade is Riverside senior Andrea Marion, who is going in the 100 meters.

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