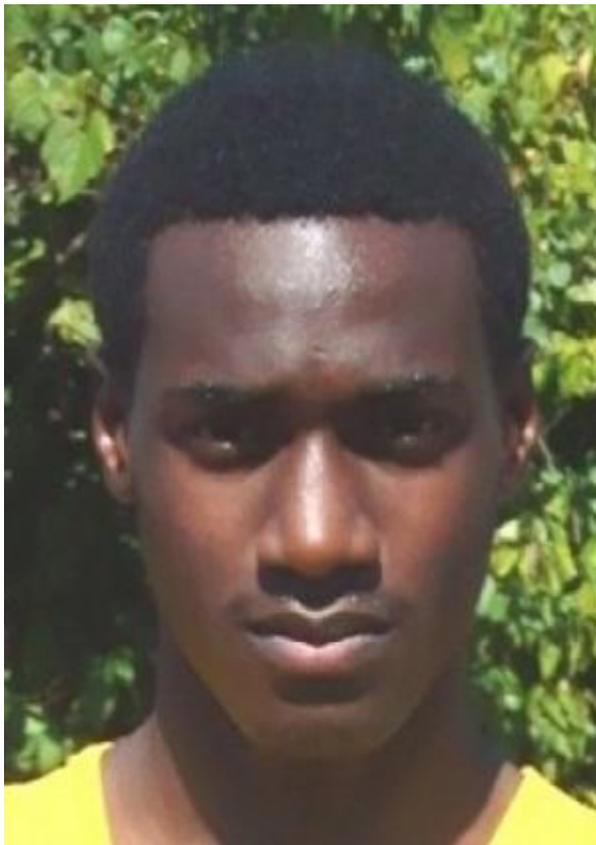


Pack mentality helps Thornwood usher in new cross country era

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Thornwood runner Reggie Brown



SOUTH HOLLAND | If one is good, two are better.

Thornwood cross country coach Brian Evans has expanded upon that accepted theory this season. In the Thunderbirds' case, all five of their top runners are good and, because of that, the team has gotten much better.

In his first year in charge of a program that's experienced many lean times, Evans has stressed a pack mentality, figuring that would give Thornwood its best opportunity to make headway within the competitive SouthWest Suburban Red. Last Saturday, that group approach made the T'birds healthy enough to capture the conference meet.

And that was accomplished in spite of Reggie Brown's cramps. Thornwood's top runner felt a twinge in his hamstring over the last 400 meters and gradually lost his spot among the leaders.

"I was scared and kind of worried," teammate Kenneth Allen said. "I was hoping he would make it all the way through. We just tried to keep our positions and do our part."

Allen and senior Johnell Seanior did even better. Both clocked out in 16 minutes, 47 seconds while occupying the Nos. 6 and 5 spots, respectively.

With Brown (16:49) able to hold on to the ninth position and two others among the top 20 finishers, the T'birds emerged with an unexpected championship.

"Honestly, I never thought that we would win conference," Seanior said. "Going there, I was scared, and on the (starting) line, I was shaking because I thought the meet before (at Rich Central) they were just playing with us. We've come a long way and it's amazing this year."

"The teams we were up against -- Andrew, Lincoln-Way West, Stagg -- are historically strong in cross country, and they were just as strong this year," Evans said. "We were elated about what happened at conference. It was exciting to break into that and, hopefully, it was the first step in the right direction."

Evans acknowledged Thornwood cross country "is not exactly a marquee event," an assessment borne out by the T'birds' lack of a storied tradition. Thornwood's boys track team has won four state championships, but its cross country squad has made only one state appearance and qualified three individuals since the school opened in the early 1970s.

"We're starting to make history," Brown said. "The last big thing was in 1979, so we're bringing cross country back."

It hasn't been without hard work. Evans routinely practices his guys twice a day, both before and after school, and he created an intense summer workout routine that Brown admitted wasn't always warmly embraced by the athletes.

"Most of the mentality was this is pointless," Brown said. "This is a hard workout and it's not going to help. We thought (Evans) was crazy, but it turned out to really benefit us a lot."

So, too, has the pack running. Brown pegged the Jimmy Daniels Invitational at Rich Central one week before the conference meet as offering the most vivid example.

"We progressed every meet, but that was our first time of packing it up real close," he said. "(There was) about 17 seconds between the first and fifth guys, and I think that's when we realized we had something really good going for us."

Thornwood took second there, and it also produced a runner-up finish at Hillcrest and third at a 37-school meet at Argo during the regular season.

"This sport is one of the few true sports," Evans said. "You can be anything. If you can put in the proper training, the sky's the limit as far as what you can do as an individual and what we can do as a team."

Evans will return most of his lineup next year, but just as important is that the T'birds now have something tangible to sell to incoming freshmen.

"Recruiting freshmen this year was kind of difficult because we couldn't say, 'We won this and all of this last year,'" Seanior said. "Next year, they can say we were conference champions, hopefully regional champions and maybe (went) to state. Everyone wants to be part of a winning team."

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