

Track and Field: Thornton's trophy run a family affair

By Tim Cronin

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"We weren't supposed to be here," Thornton track coach Vince McAuliffe was saying.

He said it standing by the north end zone of Eastern Illinois' O'Brien Field. In the end zone was the Class 3A state third-place trophy for boys track. His team was poised to make a ceremonial leap into the end zone, signifying the completion of a job well done.

Thornton's achievement may have been a surprise to McAuliffe, but it wasn't shocking. The Wildcats improved as the season went on, one of the few Chicago-area teams that did, given the lousy weather the northern half of Illinois was saddled with this spring. Led by sprinter Timothy Faust, Thornton carried on.

The Wildcats took 10 entries — eight individuals and two relays — to Charleston and advanced five to the finals.

Faust accounted for three finalists, solo in the 100- and 200-meter dashes and as part of the 800 relay. Jonathon Anderson also advanced in the 110 hurdles and Elisha Deramus in the triple jump.

The surprise going into Saturday was that just five Wildcats advanced. Nate Whittington had a bad day at shot put and discus and didn't advance. Anderson didn't get through to the 300 hurdles final, and Derrick Guest missed the 110 hurdle final. To top it off, the Wildcats' 400 relay team was disqualified for running out of its lane.

To come back and tie for third with half of your original entries on the sideline? That may have been more of an achievement than Lake Park's romp to the 3A title, achieved for the second straight year with all points scored in field events. (Runner-up York was the "winner" of the track title, with 42 of its 43 points coming from races, the other point from pole vault.)

"We talked a lot, all year, about how we'd do this," McAuliffe told his team before the end zone dash. "We did it through faith and family and putting the needs of others above yourself. The bond of a family is irreplaceable. You won this today on love."

And on the strength of Faust's fleet feet. He won the 100 in 10.49 seconds, matching the fastest winning time since Bolingbrook's Corey Day ran 10.42 in 1994. He won the 200 in 21.21 seconds. Nobody's run faster since Lake Park's Anthony Moorman posted a 20.89 victory in 1997. And the Wildcats' relay team of Demetri Smith, Jalen Banks, Guest and Faust beat runner-up York to the finish line by 1.4 seconds, the largest margin of victory in the race in 11 years and the second-largest since 1998.

That's domination, and why Faust has gotten feelers from Ohio State, Purdue and Iowa State.

McAuliffe deserves credit for building a team deep enough to score points even when everyone didn't make it to Saturday. He's coached a Thornton team to a track trophy for two years in a row, doing so with the girls squad, led by Ashley Stacey, last year. That he's had that success coaching both teams simultaneously is astonishing. Each squad has meets each weekend, and often on the same weekday. McAuliffe can't be everywhere, but, with his assistants, get the job done.

The difficult thing may be in repeating a trophy run. Faust, Guest and Whittington are graduating. However, the Wildcats girls team finished in the top 25 this year, and, with the exception of Jazuan Wallace-Sipp, the key players are returning.

The 2A stunner was Hillcrest's Saturday slump. The Hawks stumbled to ninth place after winning the first two state 2A titles. But the Hillcrest Sectional advanced 25 of its 61 state qualifiers to Saturday's finals. That's 41 percent, nearly as good as last year's 50 percent (40 of 80).

While high school track is over, it's not the end of the track season for high schoolers. Bloom's Sarff Field is the site of the Winged Foot Foundation's Southland Sprint Spectacular on Saturday, the same day LaVon Burks' Cheetahs Track Club hosts a meet at Rich Central.

The big summer meets are sanctioned by USA Track & Field. First up is the Illinois Junior Olympics at Plainfield Central from June 24 to 26. Qualifiers advance to the USATF Region 7 championship, also at Plainfield Central, from July 7 to 10, and the best from that meet move on to the USATF Junior Olympic Nationals in Wichita, Kan., from July 26 to 31.

Meanwhile, distance wizard Lukas Verzbicas, sorely missed at the boys state finals, won Monday's Main Street Mile in St. Charles, going 3:59 on the straight, slightly downhill course. His next stop is June 11 in New York to defend his high school Dream Mile title at the Diamond League Grand Prix.