

THE PROSPECTOR

SPECIAL EDITION: GIRLS' CROSS COUNTRY STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

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Girls' cross makes bold 'state' ment



photo by Alyssa Degan

ALYSSA DEGAN

Exec. Visuals Editor

Rain poured on a gloomy day at Detweiller Park in Peoria, Ill. Mud was everywhere, and tire tracks ripped up the grass — a less-than-ideal sight to most cross country runners. However, this was not the case for sophomore Ireland Wildhart and the girls' cross country team as they arrived at the state meet on Nov. 5; they couldn't help but look at the mud with positivity and glee.

"We knew it would be really fun," Wildhart said. "We'd be all muddy after the race and be cool-looking."

The girls' cross country team placed first as a team at the IHSA Class 3A State Championship. This was the first athletic state championship for Prospect since girls' golf won in 2013 and the first state championship of any kind since the speech team's 2016 win. The team had five runners in the top 18 — making

them all-state athletes — and all seven runners were in the top 41.

Senior Hailey Erickson placed fifth with a time of 17:37; sophomore Veronica Znadja placed sixth with a time of 17:39; freshman Meg Peterson placed eighth with a time of 17:43; junior Lily Ginsberg placed 13th with a time of 17:54; senior Cameron Kalaway placed 18th with a time of 18:03; senior Samantha Patterson placed 36th with a time of 18:31; sophomore Ireland Wildhart placed 41st with a time of 18:35.

Although the girls had just won state, their season was not quite over; they competed at the Nike Cross Regionals (NXR) on Nov. 13 at Terre Haute, Ind. against runners from the Midwest region, taking first place with a score of 52 points. Because they won, the top seven runners got flown out to Portland, Ore. at the expense of Nike to compete at Nike Cross Nationals (NXN) and received a plethora of swag, including uniforms, spikes and bags. The national race took place on Dec. 3 with the

Knights placing fifth in the nation.

These seven athletes not only won the state title, but they did so with the lowest team score in state history with 39 points, the previous record being 41 points, set in 2012 by St. Teresa. The mud, low 50-degree temperature and harsh winds took a toll on the team, but ultimately they were able to come out on top.

Every team competing at state was dealing with the same conditions, but Prospect had a positive outlook, which helped them embrace the adversity, according to head coach Pete Wintermute.

"I think there were moments that I thought about [the challenges the conditions would bring], but I didn't fear," Wintermute said. "I don't think the girls feared it either."

The weather wasn't the only thing Prospect had to look out for. The Knights would be competing directly against York High School, the state champions from the 2021-22 season and the team that they had been head-to-head with this season while fighting for the number one

spot.

"I feel like it was honestly more exciting than nerve-wracking because we knew with our time trial times and stuff that we had what it took to beat [York]," Kalaway said. "So we were kind of just excited to show them what we had and give it our all."

With all of these variables considered, once the race started, there was only thought in the girls' minds: run fast. Erickson led the pack, starting out strong right at the gunshot.

"I [started] really fast, and [my teammates] were right behind me and then one of my teammates yelled at me, 'You gotta go, we're following you!'" Erickson said.

The girls finished the first mile in first place with a team score of 51 points.

A make-or-break part of the course, called the triangle, is from the mile-and-a-quarter to a mile-and-a-half point, according to Wintermute.

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'Sole' sisters run in stride

Erickson, Kalaway
forge friendship

EMMA LETZIG

Online Editor-in-Chief

A "The Parent Trap"-style handshake that takes over a minute to complete is no easy task. Creative high fives and perfectly timed fist bumps are just a small part of the complex greeting. However, seniors Cameron Kalaway and Hailey Erickson find that their handshake is the most important part of their pre-race routine.

"It helps me get in the zone," Erickson said. "It helps me make sure I know that I am running with her, and that I am not running by myself because it gets pretty scary sometimes going into a big race."

Erickson and Kalaway are four-year varsity cross country athletes. They have both competed in three state championship meets (the 2020 state meet was canceled due to COVID-19) and have a plethora of accomplishments under their belts, the most recent being their victory as 2022 IHSA Class 3A State Champions. They are also four-time IHSA Sectional Champions and four-time IHSA Regional Champions, along with being three-time MSL Conference Champions. The now-senior duo has been running together since sixth grade. In fact, they became friends on the first day of middle school cross country.

Walking into practice, Kalaway didn't know many people; a few familiar faces from elementary school were there, but dozens of other random kids flooded the field for the same reason she was there: to run. During that practice, Ka-

laway made a new friend: Erickson.

"That was definitely the start, and I feel like our friendship was originally based on running but now ... we are best friends," Kalaway said.

At South Middle School, Kalaway and Erickson were a part of three state-qualifying cross country teams — qualifying every year of their middle school careers. After her success in middle school, however, Kalaway was unsure if she wanted to pursue cross country in high school.

"I honestly didn't even really think about running in high school," Kalaway said. "I was also doing swimming at that point, so I thought I would continue doing that."

However, Erickson helped convince Kalaway to try high school cross country by committing to doing it together. By having a familiar face and a close teammate to run with, the transition from middle school to high school cross country was less intimidating for Kalaway because she knew Erickson would be there alongside her.

"Honestly, Hailey is the reason that I'm running in high school. I wouldn't be doing it without her and her sister, Annika," Kalaway said.

Hailey's older sister Annika played a big part in her own decision to run cross country. Annika, who is two years older, was Prospect on the team, and Hailey witnessed first-hand how much her sister enjoyed it. She would attend her sister's high school meets and soon realized that it was something she wanted to be a part of.

Since starting high school cross country, the duo's goal has always been to try and make the experience as fun as possible. As freshmen, they would run races right next to each other and attempt to stay in sync. No matter the race — whether large, important invites or smaller dual meets — the girls would try to run the race with their legs moving in the same rhythm. They would even decisively pass other runners at the same time, one moving to the person's left and one to the right. The experience was something

that helped make the sport more enjoyable for them and strengthen a bond as they were just getting started.

"It was so funny; there are so many pictures of us from high school and middle school stride-in-stride," Hailey said. "We would go around people together; it was so fun."

As they grew older and meet days became slightly more serious, Hailey and Kalaway were able to help each other through every race.

"When we start to get nervous, we are honest and talk to each other," Kalaway said. "Because we are best friends outside of running, we have things we can talk about that aren't related to running."

Since then, high-pressure meets have become a norm for Kalaway and Hailey.

The pair have experienced intense races like IHSA State Championships, Nike Cross Country Midwest Regionals and, most recently, Nike Cross Nationals, the most prestigious, highest-performing cross country meet in the nation, held in Portland, Ore.

They have had plenty of practice calming their nerves and preparing to race. With all of this big-meet experience, they are able to help lead the rest of the team.

"[We] hopefully inspire the younger girls to have fun with it and do their best," Kalaway said. "We both try to make things fun and more light-hearted. Hailey especially ... is good at making things fun."

Looking back, the 10-year-old versions of Hailey and Kalaway could have never imagined what the future would hold.

"[At that point], we were just having fun with it," Kalaway said. "We just loved running, which I feel like is a really good place to start, loving the sport, and then all of this [success] has followed, which is so fun to experience."

Next year, Hailey will be running at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich. Kalaway is still deciding on her future athletic career. This is the first time in seven years that the two will no longer be running together.

Years of motivating each other during workouts, chatting on long runs and doing elaborate handshakes before races will have come to an end.

"This sport would for sure not be the same without [Cam], and I love running with her," Hailey said. "She always has my back in every-

HAILEY IS THE REASON THAT I'M RUNNING ... I WOULDN'T BE DOING IT WITHOUT HER,"

- Cameron Kalaway, senior



RIDE OR DIE: Seniors Cameron Kalaway (left) and Hailey Erickson (right) pose with their awards from the 2022 IHSA State Championships, 2019 IHSA Sectionals and 2018 IESA Sectionals. (photos courtesy of Kalaway and Erickson)

thing, and I completely trust her. It's going to be really sad going into college not being with her ... It's going to be hard to adjust, but I know that she's going to go far in life."

CONGRATULATIONS TO GIRLS' CROSS COUNTRY

CAM: WE COULD NOT BE MORE PROUD OF YOU AND ALL OF YOUR TEAMMATES! YOU SHOWED UP EVERY DAY, PUT IN HARD WORK, AND HAVE AWESOME ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO SHOW FOR IT. YOU GO GIRL! LOVE, MOM AND DAD

CONGRATULATIONS LILY! WE ARE SO PROUD OF YOU AND ALL OF YOUR TEAMMATES. YOU RAN FOR EACH OTHER ALL YEAR AND EMERGED AS CHAMPIONS! IT'S A SEASON TO REMEMBER. LOVE, MOM, DAD, AUDREY, AND LUKE

TO VERONI AND ALL THE RUNNER GIRLS: YOU ARE AN INSPIRATION TO KEEP RUNNING, KEEP DOING WHAT YOU LOVE, AND KEEP WORKING HARD. YOU'VE ACCOMPLISHED AMAZING THINGS TOGETHER! CONGRATS. LOVE, MOM

CONGRATULATIONS HAILEY! WE ARE SO PROUD OF YOU AND THE TEAM FOR ALL YOUR HARD WORK AND DEDICATION TO EACH OTHER THIS SEASON AND WE ARE SO EXCITED TO CELEBRATE ALL YOUR SUCCESS! YOU ARE ALL CHAMPIONS AND WE ARE HAPPY THAT YOUR SENIOR SEASON HAS BEEN SO AMAZING! LOVE, MOM, DAD, TY & ANNIKA

WHAT AN EXCITING SEASON WITH SUCH A GREAT TEAM! SO GLAD YOU COULD BE PART OF THIS! CONGRATS! WE ARE SO PROUD OF YOU, MEG! LOVE, DAD AND MOM

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE KNIGHTS AND ESPECIALLY TO MY DAUGHTER, VERONI!! YOU ARE SO INSPIRING!! SAVOR THIS MOMENT IN TIME!! LOVE, DAD

CONGRATULATIONS SAMMIE AND PROSPECT KNIGHTS! WE ARE SO PROUD OF ALL OF YOU. YOU ALL SHINE WITH EXEMPLARY CHARACTER AND DEDICATION TO EACH OTHER AND YOUR GOALS. YOU ARE STRONGER TOGETHER! LOVE, MOM, DAD, AND MELODY

CONGRATULATIONS IRISH! THIS TEAM PERFECTLY EXEMPLIFIES WHAT SELFLESS AND HARDWORKING TEAMMATES CAN ACHIEVE. YOU ARE AN INSPIRING GROUP! WE ARE IN AWE OF YOU. LOVE, MOM, DAD, AND SEBASTIAN



MUDDY BUDDIES: The athletes pose with their muddy spikes after their first-place finish on Nov. 5 in Peoria, Ill. (photo by Omar Alebiosu)

STATE: Team emerges triumphant

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Many fans camped out along the sidelines of the triangle, making sure to cheer on the team as they ran by.

"I could hear Prospect people everywhere," Erickson said. "It was perfect ... I always like to take in the people that are cheering because it really helps give positive vibes while I'm running."

This support helped the girls succeed, in combination with the support from running alongside one another.

"It was like two [girls] running together, three [girls] running together, two [girls] running together and that idea of being able to be comforted by your teammate during some of the most strenuous and difficult parts of the race. I think it helps immensely," Wintermute said.

Erickson and Znajda led, running with each other in the top five throughout most of the race. Kalaway, Ginsberg and Peterson were shortly behind.

Wildhart and Patterson were not far after, running together and pushing each other to stay strong throughout.

"I feel like we all were pretty confident in each other and knowing that if we stay with each other and focus on the ... blue jerseys, then that's when we do our best is when we're running together," Kalaway said.

The athletes stuck together from beginning to end; the team spread — the total time from Erickson to the Wildhart — was a low 58 seconds.

The emotions hit the girls even before they found out the final results.

'Looks like Prospect is going to take this home,' came over the loudspeakers, and Erickson started crying tears of joy. She was next to

Wildhart, and she engulfed her, as well as many other coaches, family and friends, in a big hug. The palpable nature of the girls' triumph was a reward within itself, according to Wintermute.

"Just knowing that you put so much time into an opportunity like this; ... many of these girls made daytime sacrifices from other activities that they do, from family, from friends and, ultimately, that is the biggest reward, knowing that you made a choice and it worked out," Wintermute said.

With such a big accomplishment, fittingly, there was a celebration. Athletic Director Omar Alebiosu and Assistant Principal for Student Activities Frank Mirandola began planning an all-school assembly for the girls on the drive home from state.

"To have a group of student athletes reset that bar is really inspiring to EveryKnight," Mirandola said. "Because you really see that you can chase those goals, you can have struggles along the way, but ultimately you still have the power to accomplish those goals."

The girls were all recognized one-by-one as they ran into the gym. A curated video of the girls discussing the importance of the team played, followed by performances by the band and dance and cheer teams.

Finally, the team handed their state trophy to Principal Greg Minter and the student body; then, the seven state-winning athletes unveiled the first-place state plaque that will hang in Jean Walker Field House for years to come.

"We look at how we want to celebrate these ladies, and my idea was just to make sure that it was over-the-top and that we do things on a grand scale, because we just don't know when we're going to get another one," Alebiosu said.