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Sports

Emerald Girls Aiming For State Title

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EMERALD'S RAE'KIMA HILL AND HANNAH-LEE FITTER (Staff photo by Kevin Fiorenzo.)

Emerald High School's girls track and field team was runner-up to Class AA state champion Bishop England by a margin of 66.33 points a year ago, and the Vikings have finished second behind the Bishops four out of the last five years. That isn't stopping Emerald distance runner Hannah-Lee Fitter from making a bold prediction for this season. "They're a good team, but I just know that we really want to beat them because in their Lower State they don't have as much competition, so by us just getting there we're already achieving something," said Fitter, who finished fourth in the 3,200-meter in 2008. "If we beat them, which we're going to, that's just like an even better accomplishment."

Fitter will be one of many pieces utilized in the Vikings' effort to unseat Bishop England, which has won eight consecutive Class AA titles. Last season, Emerald placed competitors in eight of 14 events and still finished behind the Bishops. Part of the problem with facing Bishop England is the fact the school traditionally wins the numbers battle when it comes to sending people to the state finals. "They sometimes bring three or four in each event," Emerald first-year coach Chris Worrock said. "Bishop England has been able to overwhelm Emerald just because they get people to show up. I'm not saying Bishop England doesn't have a lot of great athletes -- they do and they train great -- but it's just hard. If we can get equal numbers, we might have a chance."

With runners like Fitter and sprinter Rae'kima Hill and a number of others in the track events, Worrock and his assistant coaches' attention has been focused on filling out the field events. In 2007, Brittany Connor won the discus state title and finished third in the shot put, but Emerald has not been able to build off that success in field events. At last year's state meet in Columbia, the Vikings didn't have a single competitor in any of the field events.

Worrock is taking an interesting approach in trying to fill out the throwing and jumping events. "We've been working real hard early on field events and get those people qualified for the Upper State and state meets, which we haven't had in the past," Worrock said. "Basically our top athletes, we're going to try them at five, six, seven different events and then see what events they need to be in to get the most possible points."

Prior to this season, Zeke Goode had been the Vikings coach since 1994 and led the Emerald girls to three state titles from 1998-2000. Adjusting to Worrock, who previously coached track and football at

Saluda, hasn't been difficult, according to Fitter. "It's different, but it's not like it's bad or good," Fitter said. "It's just something fresh and something different. The coach helps, but it's the people who have the attitude and are participating that affects everything. It's been good so far."

After spending the fall as the Emerald cross country team's top runner and finishing 24th at the state meet, Fitter relaxed in the offseason and is looking forward to the level playing field that comes with running track. "When you do hill workouts for cross country, you're going to have to take on the hill sometimes, but when you do track workouts you know that everywhere you go it's the same," Fitter said. "Nobody has an advantage, nobody knows the course better."

Hill, a sophomore who won the 400 in 2007 and was part of the team that won the 400-relay last year, only runs track at Emerald and has been looking forward to the new season since last spring. "During the offseason, I did summer track so that kept me in shape, and I worked out on my own," Hill said. "We have a lot of strong people in a lot of strong events, so once we make it to state, we have a good chance of winning it."

Even with a great deal of talent returning, a team gold medal in May will require an uphill climb. "The scary thing about it is when you pull up Bishop England and you look at the state finals, most of their good kids were underclassmen," Worrock said. "It's going to take a phenomenal effort and phenomenal team to beat them."