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Sports

Menard's Emergence Kept Vikings Near Top

By KEVIN FIORENZO/Index-Journal sports writer
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Emerald's Matt Menard runs during the Lakelands Invitational at Connie Maxwell in October. Menard is the All-Lakelands boys cross country runner of the year. (Staff file photo by T.M. James)

When Emerald High School boys cross country runner Matt Menard first started running during his freshman year, it was simply as a means to get ready for basketball season. That strategy didn't take long to change.

Menard, the All Lakelands boys cross country runner of the year, didn't make it in his tryout with the basketball team, but he found his niche as a runner and concluded his high school career with a 17:07 time at the Class AA state championships in Columbia on Nov. 8 to finish fifth individually and lead the Vikings to a fifth-place team finish.

Menard also earned a team-high third-place finish at the Upper State meet with a time of 17:01. The senior has been primed to emerge this season after running last season behind Mavrick Harris, now at Wofford University. "I knew he would step into that spot," Payne said. "He was next in line for it and paid his dues. He was running behind Mavrick, being supportive and got to enjoy the spotlight of being No. 1."

His top-five result in Columbia was the highest finish for a Vikings runner at a state meet since Jonathan McAllister came in third overall in 2002, but running wasn't something Menard immediately took to as a freshman. After choosing to join the cross country and track teams on the advice of some classmates, Menard struggled initially with developing the endurance to complete a five-kilometer run and long distance track events. "He worked on mental toughness a lot, and we worked on being patient," Payne said. "I know that at a lot of track meets, he got a little too impatient and went out a little bit too hard."

By the time the Vikings' first cross country race rolled around, though, Menard already was showing signs of his potential. "My first race, I finished second on the team and everyone was real excited about my time," Menard said. "I didn't know how I did, but everyone was real excited and it was a good time, so I got more interested."

Menard enjoyed seeing his times decrease and the individual aspects of running helped him develop his affinity for the sport. "You go against people, obviously people from other schools, and you go against yourself," Menard said. "You're just trying to better yourself with your times and you can see the improvements over the years."

Menard had the capabilities to run in the top spot his junior year, but running behind Harris last season helped him develop as a runner. "Running with Mavrick was great because I didn't have the pressure to be the first runner, and also at practice, there was someone up there to run after whereas this year I kind of had to run by myself, but coach Payne would come out and push me," Menard said.

It hasn't been simply his own improvement that Menard has tracked either. He's also proven to be a committed teammate who follows other runners' progress. "It doesn't matter if they're a 17-minute runner like he is or a 30-minute runner, he gives them an equal amount of attention," Payne said. "He's interested in what they're doing most, knows everybody's goals and I think he's got the makings to be a good coach. "I know he's thinking about going into education, so I'd be tickled pink to see him be a coach, too."

Payne's main goal is to be able to sustain the success he's had the past few years with Harris and Menard through future seasons. "I hope it's not just dumb luck. I'm very pleased with the program and the guys stepping forward," Payne said. "They're setting an example and I see some other guys stepping forward that are getting lined up and ready to go."