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Sports

Pendleton Boys, SCS Girls Cruise

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The Emerald High School boys cross country team and the Greenwood Christian girls won the Lakelands Invitational last year with relative ease, but the 2008 field featured some stiffer competition.

The Greenwood and Emerald boys and girls teams hosted 13 other teams from across the Upper State in Saturday's meet at Connie Maxwell, including the defending Class AA boys team champion, Pendleton, as well as last year's SCISA Class AA-A girls winner, Spartanburg Christian.

Pendleton and Spartanburg Christian lived up to its stellar credentials and won the boys and girls team events, respectively. Pendleton's Kiki Dehondt also took the individual title with a time of 16:59, while the Warriors' Mary Davidson won the girls race in 20:37.

Emerald senior Matt Menard finished nine seconds behind Dehondt with a personal-best time of 17:08 to finish in second, the Lakelands' top male finish, as the Vikings finished fourth overall.

Alex Thomas, a Greenwood Christian junior, passed Pendleton's Jessica Whitmire over the final meters of the girls race to finish third with a time of 21:03.

Emerald's Hannah-Lee Fitter and Shelby Harris also earned All-Lakelands status by finishing sixth and seventh, respectively.

Following the Emerald boys, Greenwood (sixth), Abbeville (seventh), Ninety Six (eighth), Greenwood Christian (11th), Dixie (12th) and Palmetto Christian (14th) also competed. Saluda's boys team also raced, but only had two runners and didn't place as a team.

Behind the Emerald girls in fourth place, Greenwood Christian, Greenwood, Palmetto Christian, Abbeville and Saluda rounded out the nine competing teams. Dixie's Rebecca Evans ran a time of 22:36 and finished 20th, but was the Hornets' only girls runner.

With just eight schools competing in last year's meet, this year's field was a significant step up thanks in part to Emerald's move to Region 1-AA, which led to teams like Pendleton and Liberty attending. "One of the biggest things is we had all of our contacts from our previous region and moving to our new region, we picked a lot of teams up," Emerald boys and girls coach David Payne said.

The course at Connie Maxwell is one that's familiar to the Lakelands runners who have frequently competed on it, but the increased number of runners this year adjusted each team's approach. "You can always run faster when you have more people because you don't have the gaps (you have) when you're by yourself," Greenwood girls coach Thomas Moore said.

The heightened talent level also allowed several teams to compete against high-caliber runners they normally wouldn't face. "I'm glad more teams are here because I like the more competitive races," Greenwood Christian coach Darren Ouzts said. "When you start getting 300-400 runners, that gets a little much sometimes, but you've got teams here and they're doing a great job. "It's nice to run

against different competition to see what else is out there.”

Most teams at the race saw time bumps thanks to the increase in competitors, in particular Menard, who had his best race of the season. “I saw the focus on his face, that was the main thing,” Payne said. “We were out here every day this week working on our course and focusing on that goal. “I’m pleased. We’ve got PRs across the board from just about everybody. Definitely for this course, this is the fastest we’ve run, so that was good.”

The Eagles girls team finished sixth out of nine teams, but Moore said it was the strongest performance as far as individual times that he’s seen. Eighth-grader Molly McAlhany, Greenwood’s top runner, led the Eagles with a time of 22:59, good for 25th place. “We worked really hard (this week), and then we come out here today and I think, for the most part, the girls had their best times of the year,” Moore said. “To me, that’s really impressive because this is a hard course.”

With the state championships in Columbia looming a month away, Saturday’s large meet was a good run-through for that race. “As far as our preparation mentally and physically, we treat this like a pre-state meet,” Payne said. “This is one of our most important meets besides the state championship.”