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Sports

Vikings Senior Closes Prep Career With Fifth-Place Run At State Meet

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Emerald's Matt Menard runs during the Lakelands Invitational earlier this season. Menard closed out his high school career with a fifth-place finish at the Class AA state meet in Columbia. (Staff file photo by T.M. James)

On Friday, a day before his Class AA state cross country race at Clemson's Sandhills Research Park in Columbia, Emerald High School runner Matthew Menard ran the course to get a feel for what to expect, in particular the final leg of the race. That preparation proved crucial as Menard, a senior, moved up two spots over the final half-mile Saturday and earned a fifth-place finish with a time of 17:07. "We came out (Friday) and practiced on the course, and we worked on that last half-mile," Emerald coach David Payne said. "He ended up moving up from seventh to fifth on that last half-mile we talked about."

Menard's strong result, the highest finish for a Vikings runner since Jonathan McAllister finished third overall in 2002, helped lead Emerald to fifth place as a team. "I came in wanting to finish third and beat the school record. It was 16:58," Menard said. "But I'm still happy with fifth and 17:07. It's still a good time."

Menard finished third last week in the Upper State finals in Simpsonville, and credits Payne for enabling him to peak at the end of the season. "I think coach Payne's training plan is perfect," Menard said. "Almost everyone on the team has their best races come near the end of the season, so I give a lot of credit to coach Payne."

Choosing to bide his time early in the race, Menard slowly began gaining momentum as he went along Saturday. "I didn't go out with the first group, that was just a little too fast for me, so I just kind of ran my own race. I ran a smart race," Menard said. "I was probably around the first mile at 10th and then I just kept slowly moving up. "Some guys were out too fast, and I started picking them off."

This year's top-five performance was a vast improvement for Menard, who ran behind Mavrick Harris last year and finished 20th in the 2007 state finals. With Harris now running at Wofford, Menard has taken on even more of a leadership role. "He leads by example," Payne said. "He gets up there on the front and tells everybody to come after him."

Menard only started running during his freshman year on the advice of some classmates in his chemistry class. The four-year transition from a first-year runner to the team veteran has been a unique one. "It's been an interesting transition just from freshman year and listening to the older guys to this year being the one to tell people to step up," said Menard, who might run in college as a walk-on at Winthrop or Wofford, where he'd be reunited with Harris. "It's been a good transition, but I'm going to miss Emerald."

Payne said Menard's endurance as a runner has greatly improved over the past few years. "I know

as a freshman he did a lot of track meets where he couldn't even finish his races, but now he's a consistent guy," Payne said. "He knows what to expect when he steps on the blocks."

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