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Sports

Wildcats Fourth At State Meet

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COLUMBIA -- Hidden behind Emerald High School's shadow among Lakelands cross country teams, Ninety Six's had a coming out part at the Class A state championship Saturday. Racing at Clemson University's Sandhills Research Center, Wildcats senior Judd Larkins and sophomore Brandon McKellar took the Nos. 3 and No. 4 spots, respectively, to help lead Ninety Six to a surprising fourth-place team finish.

Larkins, who also won the Region 1-A meet on Oct. 21, came in with a time of 18:01, while McKellar was just a few seconds behind at 18:05, leading to a surprised response from coach Chris Watts. "Brandon McKellar showed out today. I can't even (have) the words to describe how awesome that was," Watts said. "I saw Judd come around and thought, 'All right, that's about what I expected,' and then all of sudden Brandon hits that ridge (before the finish line) and I saw him come over the top. "I just about flipped out. It was awesome."

Along with Ninety Six, Dixie finished 12th overall and its top finisher was Justin Douglas in 46th place with a time of 20:37. In the Class AA/A girls race, Emerald came in 10th place as a team, and Shelby Harris led the Vikings at 21:26 in 18th place. Teammate Hannah-Lee Fitter was close behind in 24th place with a 21:48 time. Dixie's Rebecca Evans was the Hornets' sole runner and she ran a time of 22:41, good for 48th place.

Emerald senior Matthew Menard capped his high school career with a fifth-place finish and a 17:07 time, buoying the Viking boys to fifth place overall. Jon David Manning was Abbeville's only runner, and he finished 18th with a time of 18:34.

A mile into the Class A boys race, Larkins was side-by-side with Academic Magnet's Allan DaPore, who eventually won the race. It wasn't until reaching a hill with about a mile left that Larkins began becoming fatigued. "The hill's what got me. I couldn't really recover from that hill," Larkins said. "(The wind) was a big factor on that hill because the wind was blowing right at you so it was pushing you backward the whole time."

He didn't stay at the front throughout the whole race, but closing out his senior year with his best finish ever was a good capper for Larkins. "I was hoping for more at about the mile mark when I was with the leader, but this is my first medal at state, so I'm happy about it," Larkins said.

An injury to McKellar in 2007 kept the then-freshman out of the state meet last season, but this year he made the most of his opportunity. "I figured I was going to come in a little bit slower than I have been all year because the Lakelands (Invitational) is a fast meet, but I got out here and ran an 18:05," McKellar said. "It surprised me a lot."

Larkins will be graduating in the spring, but another two years with McKellar could give Watts a solid foundation for the future. "It really gives me encouragement and makes me have good feelings about next year," Watts said. "I'm really looking forward to see what comes of that. "If I could've put that dedication in every one of our runners, we'd be taking home hardware right now."

Menard was the Vikings' only top-25 finisher, but all seven of Emerald's runners came in with times

under 20 minutes as they overcome a heavy crosswind throughout the day. "I was real pleased that we got both teams in the top 10 and these were windy conditions, but I thought they responded really well," Emerald coach David Payne said. "I saw some other teams that traditionally beat us, but we were able to beat them because I think if the conditions are tough, we always have the advantage."

Fitter had been running in the top spot for the Vikings earlier in the season, but Harris has steadily worked her way up, earning a 19th-place finish at the Upper State meet last weekend. "I didn't get the time or the place I wanted, but I felt like I gave a good effort the whole race and I tried my hardest, so I'm pleased with it," Harris said.