

CROSS-COUNTRY SEASON PREVIEWS

New leaders, old goals for RHS squads

Big three
returnees
lead boysBY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

RIDGEWOOD – The Ridgewood boys cross-country program has a history synonymous with success, and the 2014 season proved to be no different as the Maroons ran to divisional and state-sectional championships.

But it's the final meet, the State Group 4 race and one of Ridgewood's few disappointments from last year, that still lingers with the team. The Maroons struggled in the mid-November race at Holmdel, finishing a disappointing seventh to wrap up the team's season.

"We didn't run great at that state group meet last year, and a lot of the varsity guys recognized that, and they're actively every day trying to rectify that," said first-year head coach Patrick Ryan, a volunteer assistant last season who was hired in June to succeed long-time coach Mike Glynn. "They're really taking an active role in trying to be better than they were last year."

Despite the disappointment of the group meet, Ridgewood has plenty of accomplishments on which to build heading into 2015. The squad captured its fifth straight North 1, Group 4 title, giving the program 11 of the past 13 sectional championships.

The Maroons also came in second in the Bergen County group meet and the Bergen Meet of Champions (BMOC), behind county powerhouse Don Bosco. This season, new county classifications placed Don Bosco in a non-public group, which gives Ridgewood a great opportunity to win the Group A title.

Leading the Maroons will be the big three of Kenneth Marshall, Nick Barnabic and Billy Byrne, who all played a major role in the team's success last year. "They're ready to roll," Ryan said of the trio. "They're pushing through early-season workouts like cake."

Marshall's best performance of 2014 came in the North 1, Group 4 race at Garret Mountain, where he finished first in 16:14. Barnabic and Byrne finished right on his heels, taking third and fourth, respectively, to help the Maroons clinch the sectional title.

Marshall also collected top 10 finishes in the Freedom Division meet (third), county group meet (eighth) and the BMOC (ninth). He capped off his season with a 20th-place effort at the Group 4 meet, which earned him a berth in the State Meet of Champions (SMOC).

Barnabic usually found a way to finish near the top along with Marshall. The senior collected four top 10 efforts in the major meets, including a second-place performance in the Big North Freedom Division meet that was critical in helping Ridgewood edge Indian Hills, 30-32, for the division crown.

Barnabic and Marshall finished 1-2 at the season-opening meet Tuesday against Hackensack at Darlington Park in Mahwah, won by the Maroons, 18-45. The victory represented an ideal start for Ridgewood, but Barnabic and his teammates are more focused on building up to reach their late-season goals.

"Last year we really went into the season a lot harder than we did this year, so we're trying to outlast ourselves from last year," Barnabic said.

Byrne emerged as a pleasant surprise for the Maroons in 2014 and looks to continue to improve this season. As a sophomore, he collected a fifth-place finish in the division meet, as well as the aforementioned fourth place in the sectional race. He also provided the Maroons important depth in the county group and BMOC races, finishing 11th and 13th, respectively.

Marshall said the Maroons have undertaken a training regimen designed to have runners hit their peak later in the season.

"I think it's been a pretty smooth transition overall," he said. "We're probably going to throw down some really great performances late in the season when it really matters."

Behind Marshall, Barnabic and Byrne, the Maroons have a wide-open competition for multiple spots.

"We probably have six or seven guys behind Nick, Kenny and Billy that are



MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH/THE RIDGEWOOD NEWS

The Ridgewood boys cross-country team will be led by senior captains, from left, Brad Gilligan, Kenneth Marshall, Michael Thurston, Brendan Hughes and Nick Barnabic.

2015 Ridgewood High School varsity cross-country schedule

REMAINING DUAL/CHAMPIONSHIP MEETS

Sept. 18 Maroon Invitational, Garret Mountain Reservation (Woodland Park)

Sept. 21 vs. Ramapo at Darlington Park (Mahwah)

Sept. 26 Bowdoin Cross-Country Classic, Bowdoin Park (Wappingers Falls, N.Y.)

Sept. 28 vs. Paramus at Darlington Park

Oct. 3 Shore Coaches Invitational, Holmdel Park (Holmdel)

Oct. 5 vs. Indian Hills and Northern Highlands at Darlington Park

Oct. 10 Garret Invitational, Garret Mountain

Oct. 15 Big North Freedom Division championships, Garret Mountain

Oct. 24 Bergen County Group A championships, Darlington Park

Oct. 31 Lou Molino Bergen County Meet of Champions, Darlington Park

Nov. 4 State JV/Freshman championships, Thompson Park (Jamesburg)

Nov. 7 North 1, Group 4 sectional championships, Garret Mountain

Nov. 14 State Group 4 championships, Holmdel Park

Nov. 21 State Meet of Champions, Holmdel Park

*Schedule subject to change

Girls team
starts year
ranked No. 1BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

RIDGEWOOD – Steve Opremcak's tenure as the Ridgewood High School girls cross-country coach is just a few months old, but he has the benefit of starting with a program positioned firmly at the top of the sport.

The Maroons entered the 2015 season atop *The Record* Top 25 rankings and started the year with a 20-43 victory in a dual meet versus Hackensack at Darlington Park in Mahwah.

"It's very flattering to be ranked by *The Record* where we are, but we have to perform to that level," Opremcak said in a phone interview last Friday. "That's what we're focusing on: what we can do, how we race and how we train."

Opremcak was named successor to long-time coach and program founder Jacob Brown in June after serving as an assistant during the cross-country and spring track seasons. Opremcak previously worked as head coach for the Indian Hills boys and girls teams from 1998 to 2007, and his return to head coaching has gone smoothly so far.

"It's not that big of an adjustment," senior Sam Halvorsen said before practice Wednesday. "We're all used to his style of coaching."

"I feel very fortunate that I've been accepted by the girls," Opremcak said. "They knew me from being around the program for seven years, so that wasn't much of an issue."

One issue that the Maroons do face is the graduation loss of three big contributors – Carleen Jeffers, Kelly Cleary and Abby Taylor – from last year's team. The seniors helped Ridgewood claim championships in Bergen County Group A, the Bergen Meet of Champions (BMOC) and North 1, Group 4.

The team also placed fourth in the State Group 4 meet and added a third-place effort in the State Meet of Champions (SMOC) to cap a tremendous year.

However, Ridgewood retains a talented group of underclassmen eager to lead the team back to the lofty heights achieved last season.

"We have a pretty solid core of girls that trained over the summer," Opremcak said. "Our leadership has been excellent. The seniors captains have just been outstanding."

One of those captains is Halvorsen, who formed one half of the dominant 1-2 punch with Jeffers but entered the season surrounded by question marks.

"Sam had lost her winter and spring seasons because of a concussion from snowboarding [suffered last December]," Opremcak said. "She really hadn't been cleared to run, to resume training until late June, and as senior and being so talented, she's doing college visits. It's been very busy summer for her. She's back training, and we're really excited."

In her outstanding junior season, Halvorsen finished in the top 10 at every major championship meet. She claimed first at the North 1, Group 4 meet and followed that up with a bronze medal at the State Group 4 race.

Previously, she ran to a third-place finish in the Freedom Division meet, a fourth-place effort in the county group championships and third in the BMOC.

On Tuesday, Halvorsen finished second in the dual meet against Hackensack, her first race in more than eight months.

"It was certainly an interesting day to come back, with it being 97 degrees, but it was nice to kind of get back in the rhythm of things," Halvorsen said. "It was really nice to be at a meet and be able to participate with [my teammates] in that kind of team atmosphere."

Olympia Martin, who emerged as a top-six runner in her sophomore year, again is expected to be a huge contributor for the Maroons this season. She collected top 10 finishes in the division (seventh), county groups (fifth), BMOC (ninth) and sectional meets (eighth).

Martin's classmate Corina Cobb also thrust herself into the Maroons' top six for much of the 2014 campaign with her best finish coming at the county group meet, where she finished 24th.

Sophomore Meghan Adams joins her



MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH/THE RIDGEWOOD NEWS

Ridgewood seniors, from left, Erin Dwyer, Anya Sherman, Leah Rosenfeld and Sam Halvorsen serve as the captains for the Ridgewood girls cross-country team, which entered the season as the top-ranked squad in North Jersey.

fighting for a spot," Ryan said. "It's going to be nice to see how that shakes out over the next month or so."

Seniors Brendan Hughes and Andrew Taggart are top candidates to make an impact this season.

After being hampered by injuries the past two seasons, Hughes performed well in preseason training, according to Ryan. Meanwhile, Taggart is coming off a solid spring season in the 800 meters and as part of the 4-x-800 relay.

Seniors Michael Thurston and Brad Gilligan, who serve as captains along with Marshall, Barnabic and Hughes,

also will be in the mix.

"The team, JV and varsity, is very balanced this year," Gilligan said. "I'm going to say we have 15 good caliber runners or 20. They're going to balance out the team."

Sophomore Ben Zamboldi is looking to do big things in his first year on the varsity program.

"Ben ran cross-country last year and was our standout freshman and has made a nice transition from being a freshman to being an upperclassman and realizing he has a more important role," said Ryan, who added that soph-

omore Sid Wagh also impressed in the preseason.

The Maroons are ranked third in *The Record* Top 25, behind Don Bosco and River Dell, but they are comfortable with the usual high expectations heaped upon the cross-country program.

"We're looking at getting a chance at qualifying for Nike Nationals," Marshall said. "We might be the first Ridgewood team ever to do so, and I think we have a good shot this year."

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GIRLS XC from C1

older teammates as another dependable option for the Maroons after notching three top 20 finishes in championship meets last fall.

“Meghan Adams, as a freshman, really jumped in and contributed, and of course we’re looking for her to continue those contributions and improve,” Opremcak said.

Leah Rosenfeld, Anya Sherman and Erin Dwyer will serve as the other three senior captains along with Halvorsen and provide the Maroons depth from the senior ranks.

“We graduated three of our top varsity runners from last year, but over the summer we had a huge group of really good runners,” Sherman said.

Haley Driscoll, Lauren Pagano, Hannah Fishbein, Evelyn Kotch and Sophia Sheehy

figure to make their way into the equation as well, giving the Maroons several options.

“The freshman group last year was really strong so we have really between six and eight girls who are competing for those additional varsity spots,” Opremcak said.

The coach said it might take a while to settle on a top lineup, but the competition among his runners has been a positive for the team.

“If we go through several lineups, I don’t think that’s going to be an issue,” Opremcak said. “They’re competing for spots, but they’re supportive. It’s a great bunch of kids, my goodness.”

The season continues next Friday with the Maroon Invitational at Garret Mountain.

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KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Olympia Martin, Sam Halvorsen, Hannah Fishbein and Meghan Adams cruise to the finish line in Ridgewood’s dual-meet victory over Hackensack on Tuesday.

RIDGEWOOD ROUNDUP

Boys XC team wins Season Opener title

A trio of juniors led the Ridgewood High School boys cross-country team to victory in last Saturday's Season Opener Invitational at Darlington Park in Mahwah.

Billy Byrne (16:57), Brad Rynkowski (17:05) and Jonah Naftzger (17:10) ran 4-6-7 to help the Maroons defeat Hackensack, 42-54, for the Varsity A division title. Senior Brendan Hughes (ninth, 17:18) also placed in the top 10.

Junior Matteo Robazza (16th, 17:27) senior Andrew Taggart (18th, 17:32) and junior Joseph Bolduc (28th, 17:58) rounded out the RHS finishing order.

Ridgewood will return to action tomorrow when it hosts the Maroon Invitational at Garret Mountain in Woodland Park. The team's next scheduled dual meet is Monday at Darlington against Ramapo.

Girls Cross-Country

The Maroons rested their top regulars for the Season Opener meet and took fourth place in the Varsity A division, scoring 114 points to finish behind Montclair (26 points), Clifton (49) and Union City (95).

Senior Anya Sherman (20th, 22:19) and juniors Mia LoParo (24th, 22:39) and Quinn Daly (30th, 22:47) clocked the top times for RHS, while juniors Sarah Catalano (23:01) and Meghan Mancini (23:04) and seniors Erin Walicki (23:17) and Tatiana Mehos (23:35) all placed in the top 45.

Like their boys counterparts, the Maroon girls are 1-0 in dual meets entering Monday's matchup versus Ramapo.

Girls Tennis

Ridgewood netted a pair of impressive wins at the September Slam Tournament in Livingston

on Saturday, besting Morristown, 3-2, and J.P. Stevens of Edison, 4-1. The team had split with the same two opponents at last year's Slam.

Junior Alex Absey defeated Morristown's Isabelle Berzins in straight sets for the Maroons' only singles win, and they swept both doubles matches thanks to the tandems of senior Elizabeth O'Keefe and freshman Sophia Swanson (first) and juniors Kolby Erskine and Kat Bonfiglio (second).

In the match against state-ranked J.P. Stevens, sophomore Julia Yoon and freshman Emma Hultqvist prevailed for RHS at singles, with the latter winning a pair of tiebreaker sets against the Hawks' Deepti Talesra, 7-6 (7-2), 4-6, 7-6 (7-5). O'Keefe and Swanson won at first doubles, while Bonfiglio and junior Kelly Rekucki did the same at second doubles.

Including a pair of victories over Paramus - 4-1 last Friday and 5-0 on Wednesday, the four-game winning streak raised the Maroons' overall record to 4-1.

Girls Volleyball

RHS fell to rival Paramus on Wednesday night, 25-15, 25-19, to drop to 0-2 on the season. The team had taken Ramapo to three sets in its Sept. 10 season opener before bowing, 25-21, 16-25, 25-15.

Senior outside hitter Brittany Gilbert averaged eight kills per match during the Maroons' week, while sophomore setter Emily Rea averaged 10 assists and junior libero Shea Darienzo 6.5 digs.

After finishing fifth in pool play at last Saturday's Jersey Classic in Paramus, Ridgewood gets back into tournament action with tomorrow's Northern Valley Invitational in Demarest.

- Greg Tartaglia

BOYS CROSS-COUNTRY: MAROON INVITATIONAL

RHS retakes title

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

A second-place finish in 2014 ended Ridgewood High School's three-year run of dominance at the Maroon Invitational, but this year's cross-country squad once again took its place atop the standings at its namesake meet with a dominant performance.

RHS ran away with the Groups 3-4 race, placing four finishers in the top seven and six runners in the top 15 to defeat runner-up Hackensack, 28-91, last Friday at Garret Mountain Reservation in Woodland Park.

"It's promising," head coach Patrick Ryan said in a phone interview earlier this week. "It looks as good as preseason or early-season stuff can look."

The victory marked Ridgewood's fourth triumph in five years since the school began to co-sponsor the event with Clifton High School.

Senior Kenneth Marshall took gold in the race in 16:50, while classmate Nick Barnabic placed third with a time of 17:01.

The Maroons received a balanced effort from all classes, as sophomores Ben Zamboldi and Sid Wagh finished fifth and 15th, respectively, while juniors Billy Byrne and Brad Rynkowski took eighth and 14th.

Zamboldi and Wagh headlined a group of young runners from whom Ryan expected big things this season. They haven't disappointed.

"We have a couple guys that have jumped out with nice [personal records] that almost were expected; it was only a matter of time," Ryan said. "The two sophomores, Ben and Sid, really have had a nice early-season showing."

The effort at the Maroon Invitational built on the success the team achieved at the Season Opener Meet on Sept. 12 at Darlington Park in Mahwah.

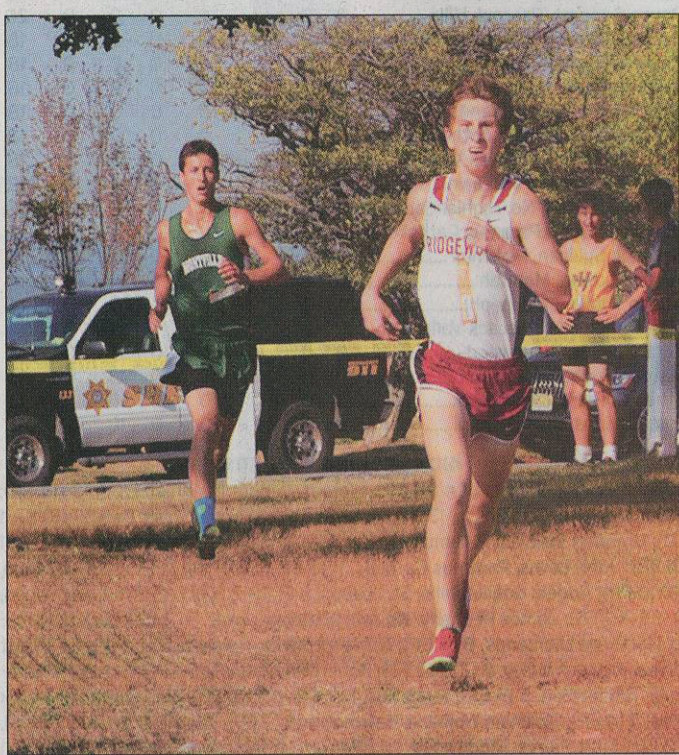
That day, a less experienced group of Ridgewood runners led the team to a victory over runner-up Hackensack, 42-54, as underclassmen Byrne, Rynkowski and Jonah Naftzger finished among the top seven.

Ryan has been working on getting several runners involved in the early going as his athletes work their way into mid-season form.

"We'll go around and talk to all the guys and see how they're feeling, depending on what they did the day before, how their race was," he said about choosing who runs in each of the meets.

Luckily for Ryan and his team, the Maroons' tremendous depth allows them to cycle in several runners without sacrificing results.

The boys showed that quality



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Ridgewood senior Kenneth Marshall, right, holds off Jenks Hehmeyer of Montville to win the Maroon Invitational Groups 3-4 race last Friday at Garret Mountain. Marshall's victory helped propel the Maroons to the team title at the meet.

in Monday's dual-meet victory over Ramapo, 16-47, at Garret Mountain, claiming 10 of the first 11 places in the race, even though some of the team's top athletes didn't participate.

Matteo Robazza finished well ahead of the pack in 16:59 to lead RHS. Meanwhile, Zamboldi, Wagh and Andrew Taggart all clocked 17:58 to finish second through fourth. The win upped the Maroons' dual-meet record to 2-0.

Three weeks into the season, Ryan is beginning to gain some clarity on what his lineup might look like as the major championship meets approach.

"We're down to, instead of maybe 14 or 15 guys that could fight for a spot, we're closer to about 10 that could maybe rotate into [the top] seven," he said. "We have a couple of guys fighting for the seventh spot that are going back and forth a little bit and are kind of all performing at a little higher level than I expected at this point in this season."

The team's next test comes tomorrow at the Bowdoin Park Cross-Country Classic in Wappingers Falls, N.Y. The Maroons haven't attended the event since 2012 when they finished first in their division.

Ryan considers the meet yet another test to determine his top seven runners.

"We'll see how those guys that are close compete on probably the hardest course we're going to run," he said, "and see what kind of effect that has on them and their competitiveness and their

ability to race in an environment with all these schools that we're going to be seeing in the regional meet. We'll see how they handle the pressure a little bit."

Maroon girls take fifth

The Ridgewood girls team finished fifth in Groups 3-4 at the Maroon Invitational with 143 points, while Montville (20) took home the title.

Senior captain Anya Sherman provided the best time for the Maroons, finishing in 23:57 to take 27th place. Juniors Quinn Daly and Mia LoParo crossed the finish line seconds apart to take 34th and 37th, respectively.

Seniors Erin Walicki and Kelly Dwyer and junior Sarah Catalano also participated in the meet for Ridgewood.

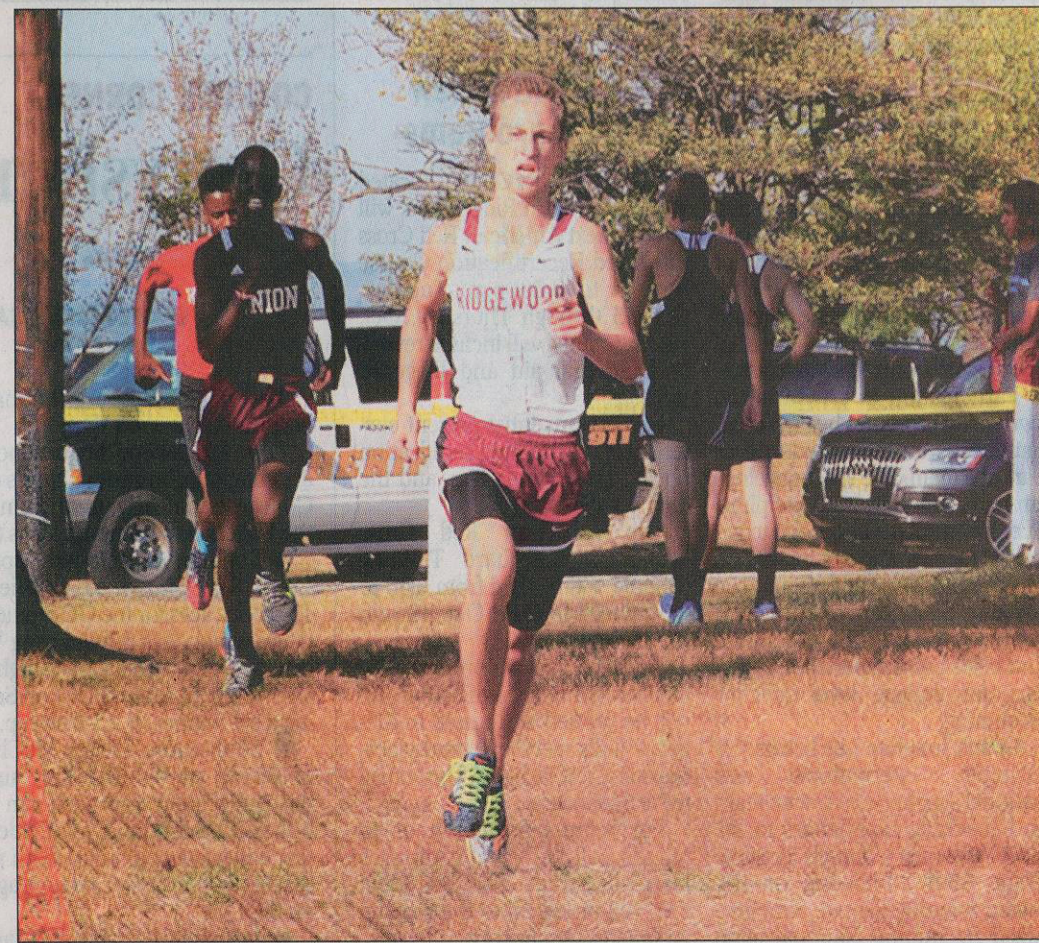
The team continued its dual-meet schedule with a 20-43 defeat of Ramapo on Monday at Garret Mountain to improve to 2-0.

Ramapo's Lexi Harris won the race in 19:57, but the Maroons occupied spots two through nine, led by second-place finisher Sam Halvorsen, who clocked 20:35.

Junior Olympia Martin placed third (20:45) and sophomore Meghan Adams finished right behind her in fourth (20:51).

Sophia Sheehy, Leah Rosenfeld, Lauren Pagano, Evelyn Kotch and Corina Cobb, all among a deep group of runners that could contribute this season, placed fifth through ninth within 32 seconds of each other.

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Ridgewood sophomore Ben Zamboldi clocked in at 17:24 en route to a fifth-place finish in the Maroon Invitational Groups 3-4 race.

RIDGEWOOD ROUNDUP

Boys XC gives 'classic' effort

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Senior Kenneth Marshall clocked the eighth-best time to lead a strong Ridgewood High School boys cross-country contingent to a sixth-place team effort at the Bowdoin XC Classic in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., last Saturday.

Christian Brothers Academy, ranked No. 1 in the nation by multiple publications, placed first with 37 points in the Varsity Group 1 race, while the Maroons totaled 138 points.

Marshall's time of 16:45.11 set the pace for the Maroons in the 5K race on what RHS head coach Patrick Ryan said would "probably be the hardest course" his team would face this season.

Ridgewood junior Billy Byrne placed 24th in 17:09.34, while senior Nick Barnabic clocked 17:11.45 to take 27th. Junior Brad Rynkowski (36th), sophomores Ben Zamboldi (43rd) and Sid Wagh (58th) and senior Brendan Hughes (65th) also contributed for the Maroons.

The RHS JV squad also performed well, led by Jonah Naftzger and Matteo Robazza, who finished fifth and seventh, respectively, to help the younger Maroons team to a third-place showing. Soham Basu, Andrew Taggart, Joe Bolduc and Joe O'Keefe all finished in the top 20 of the race.

Ridgewood followed up with a 19-40 dual-meet win over Paramus on Monday at Garret Mountain in Woodland Park.

Rynkowski, Wagh and Hughes paved the way, occupying the top three spots. Naftzger, Robazza, Madison Rademacher and Basu all finished in the top 10.

The boys will race in the Shore Coaches Invitational tomorrow at Holmdel Park. The Maroons won the Shore Varsity B race last season, thanks in large part to a seventh-place finish by Marshall and Barnabic's eighth-place effort.

Dual-meet masters

The Ridgewood girls cross-country team topped Paramus,



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Ridgewood senior Nick Barnabic, left, finished 27th in the Bowdoin XC Classic Varsity 1 race last Saturday to help the Maroons take sixth place against some of the country's top teams.

15-48, in Monday's dual meet at Garret Mountain to improve its record to 3-0. That came just two days after the squad took sixth in the Passaic County Coaches Invitational Group 4 race on the same course.

Ridgewood secured the top five positions against Paramus, as freshman Cassie Keyes' time of 23:09 set the standard. She was followed by junior Haley Driscoll (23:30), junior Quinn Daly (23:55), junior Sarah Catalano (24:09) and sophomore Beatrice Davis (24:20).

Like their counterparts, the Maroon girls will head to Holmdel for tomorrow's Shore Coaches Invitational.

Girls soccer seeking wins

A two-goal halftime deficit proved too much for the RHS girls soccer team to overcome, as it fell at home to Paramus Catholic, 2-1, on Sept. 24.

Maroon sophomore Nicole Macolino scored her first goal of the year in the second half. Senior Julia Donovan made six saves, while freshman Britt Cunningham stopped three shots.

Ridgewood played to a scoreless tie last Saturday at NV/Old Tappan to move its record to 2-5-1. Cunningham had a solid day in net, making eight saves.

The Maroons were slated to play at West Orange yesterday, and they have NV/Demarest on the schedule for this afternoon, weather permitting.

Boys soccer fit to be tied

The Ridgewood boys soccer team rode a streak of two straight ties heading into Thursday's game at NV/Demarest (after press deadline).

The Maroons battled to a scoreless tie last Saturday at NV/Old Tappan. Sophomore goalkeeper Thomas Benson

made 13 saves for Ridgewood, while Jake Fiore made 12 saves for the Knights in the 100 minutes of goalless soccer.

Monday night, the Maroons engaged in a 1-1 stalemate with Bergenfield. Dean Anzalone scored a first-half goal on an assist by Jimmy Conboy to give Ridgewood the lead.

However, Denis Dema set up Sebastian Leone's equalizer for the Bears in the second half. Benson made nine saves, while Alex Arcila stopped seven shots for Bergenfield.

Ridgewood's record stood at 3-2-2 as the Bergen County seeding meeting approaches.

Spiking at the Viking

The RHS girls volleyball team reached the quarterfinals of the Clarkstown South Invitational in West Nyack, N.Y., last Saturday.

See **ROUNDUP**, page C3

ROUNDUP from C2

Ridgewood, seeded fifth after winning its pool, topped No. 12 Nanuet (N.Y.) in its tournament-round opener, 25-15. Facing No. 4 seed Walter Panas of Cortlandt Manor, N.Y., in the quarterfinals, the Maroons battled well through the first two dozen points before falling to the eventual champion, 25-15.

Ridgewood, the only New Jersey team in its pool, swept two games against Albertus Magnus (Bardonia, N.Y.), split a pair of games versus Millbrook and took the first game against North Rockland before resting its players for the elimination round.

The Maroons (2-4) returned to Big North dual-match play Tuesday, losing to NV/Old Tappan, 25-22, 25-15.

Through six matches, sophomore Emily Rea leads the team in aces (11), serving percentage (98.1) and assists (44).

Senior Brittany Gilbert leads the team in kills with 48, while junior Shea Darienzo has 35 digs to lead the squad.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Junior Sarah Catalano was the Ridgewood girls cross-country team's No. 2 finisher at Saturday's Passaic County Coaches Invitational and the No. 4 runner in Monday's dual meet versus Paramus. Both events were run at Garret Mountain.



RECORD FILE PHOTO

Meghan Adams (19:46), Sam Halvorsen (18:33) and Olympia Martin (18:32) clocked the top three times for Ridgewood in Monday's dual-meet victory over Northern Highlands, which wrapped up a regular-season Freedom Division title for the Maroons.

GIRLS CROSS-COUNTRY

RHS tops in division after dual-meet wins

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Just two days after rolling out his top lineup for the first time this season, Ridgewood High School girls cross-country coach Steve Opremcak asked his go-to runners for another big effort on short rest.

The girls delivered as the Maroons defeated Indian Hills, 20-43, and edged Northern Highlands, 27-30, on Monday at Darlington Park in Mahwah to secure a 5-0 record in dual meets and clinch the Big North Freedom Division regular-season crown after running in the Shore Coaches Invitational on Saturday at Holmdel Park.

"It feels great," Opremcak said in a phone interview Monday night. "I'm happy that the girls bought into the gamble of racing the Shore hard and being strong enough to come back and take care of business today. It was pretty cool."

Junior Olympia Martin finished second in the three-team race, clocking in at 18:32, just one second of teammate and third-place finisher Sam Halvorsen. Indian Hills senior Julia Guerra placed first in 17:55.

Meanwhile, the Northern Highlands quartet of Monica Hebner, Isabel Hebner, Jodi Hinchin and Paige Wilderotter finished in fourth through seventh place.

But Ridgewood's Meghan Adams (19:46), Hannah Fishbein (20:02) and Sophia Sheehy (20:23) grabbed eighth through 10th to help seal the victory for

the Maroons.

"Northern Highlands is a really good team, it's a great rivalry and we have to be at our best to compete with them," Opremcak said. "Fortunately we were able to prevail today."

The Maroons and Highlanders will face off again in the Freedom Division championship meet next Thursday at Garret Mountain Reservation in Woodland Park.

Monday's meet built off a solid performance by Ridgewood at the Shore Coaches Invitational on Saturday as they finished third in the Varsity A race.

Martin led the charge for the Maroons, finishing fifth in 19:15, while Halvorsen placed sixth in 19:23.

Ridgewood finished with 149 points, behind West Windsor-Plainsboro South (141) and Hillsborough (115), but the Maroons' top five runners clocked in with an average time of 20:24.80, the best such time among the 20 schools in the race.

Adams finished 27th in 20:35, while Sheehy placed 50th in 21:15. Lauren Pagano, the Maroons' fifth finisher, clocked 21:36.

Ridgewood also showed off its depth and bright future as the freshman team placed third in its race, while the JV squad came in fourth.

"Whether the girls ran the varsity race, JV or freshman, all the girls performed really well," Opremcak said. "The experienced girls, I believe almost every one of them ran their personal best in their entire careers down there in some pretty tough conditions."

Halvorsen didn't set a personal record, but Opremcak has been encouraged by her progress this season after she sat out the winter and spring track seasons due to a concussion.

"She's looked absolutely great in practice. I think it's only natural to have a little bit of concern about a real race; races are different," Opremcak said. "To not race in nine or 10 months and to run the quality race that she did and the effort that I saw, she's just going to get stronger."

With Halvorsen and Martin occupying the top two spots and Adams emerging as the team's third-best runner, Opremcak will face difficult decisions in filling out the final four spots of his lineup as the major championship meets approach. However, the coach believes the tough choices are caused by a wealth of depth rather than a failure of his athletes to make an impression.

"I'm reluctant to say [which runners have an edge] because our freshmen are improving so rapidly and it's hard to tell," he said. "The first three are pretty much right there. We have probably eight to 10 kids depending on the day competing for the next four spots."

"One of the things that's just spectacular about the Ridgewood program and these girls in particular is that they're trying to get to the varsity themselves, but they don't begrudge their teammates," Opremcak continued. "They recognize that if everybody works hard, we're all going to attain our best."

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BOYS CROSS-COUNTRY

Maroons hope third time is the charm against rival

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

The next chapter in the 2015 edition of the Ridgewood-Indian Hills boys cross-country rivalry will be written next Thursday at the Big North Freedom Division championships at Garret Mountain Reservation, and the Maroons are sorely hoping for a new ending.

The Braves bested Ridgewood twice over the span of three days, as Indian Hills placed first at the Shore Coaches Invitational at Holmdel Park on Saturday and edged the Maroons, 27-28, in a dual meet Monday to claim the Freedom regular-season title.

"We knew it was going to be a tough race [Monday]," Ridgewood head coach Patrick Ryan said in a phone interview Tuesday afternoon. "When I did the math a couple times Sunday night, it came out 27-28 us, 27-28 them. I did it about four or five different times."

Ridgewood topped Northern Highlands, the third team in the tri-meet at Darlington Park in Mahwah, 15-50, but the math didn't go in the Maroons' favor against the Braves.

Seniors Nick Barnabic (16:06) and Kenneth Marshall (16:07) finished second and third behind Indian Hills' Matt Cohane (15:56).

The Braves' Chris Corcoran took fourth (16:10) just ahead of Ridgewood's Billy Byrne (16:11) and the Indian Hills tandem of Derek Barney (16:13) and Steven Fiumefreddo (16:15) placed comfortably in sixth and seventh.

Brad Rynkowski of Ridgewood took eighth, but the Braves' Chris Leymeister finished four seconds ahead of Maroon sophomore Sid Wagh to seal the victory.

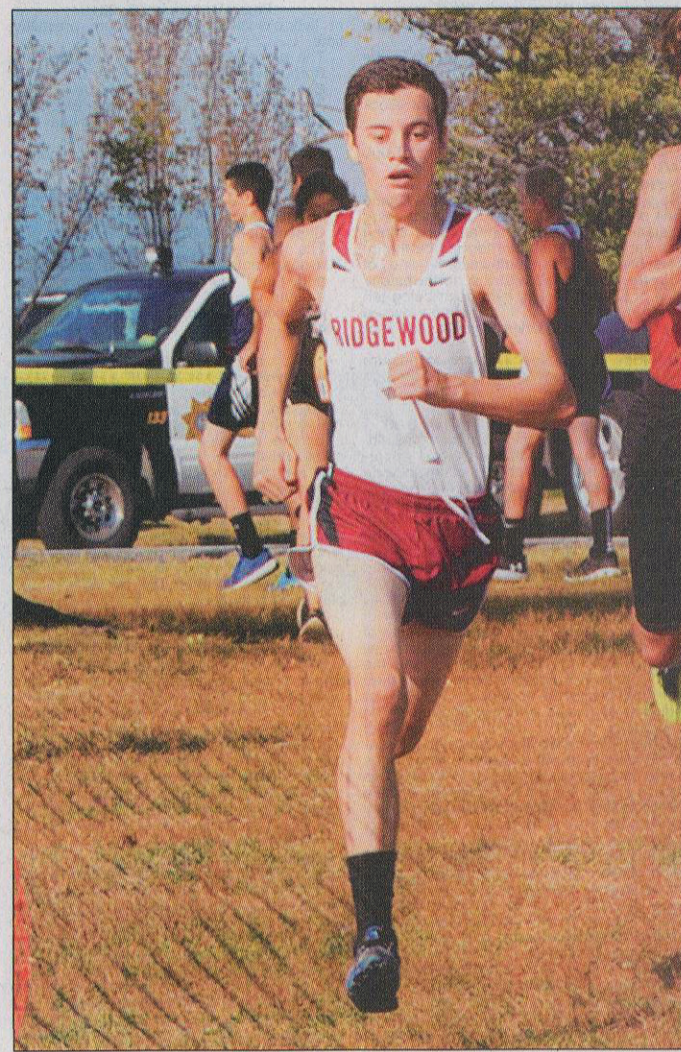
"There are little things we can change," Ryan said. "But overall we can't be too mad; it was the fastest dual meet I've seen. Except for Nick, Kenny and [junior] Billy [Byrne], the next four varsity guys all [set a personal record] by 30 seconds. You can't ask for much more."

Ryan also considered the race an improvement on his team's "good, not great" effort two days prior in the Shore Varsity B race, in which Ridgewood totaled 114 points to place second behind Indian Hills' 51.

Marshall came home second in 16:38 to lead the Maroons, while Barnabic, his fellow team captain, ran eighth in 16:51. However, Indian Hills placed three runners in the top 10 and five in the top 20 to run away with the top honors.

Several RHS runners took part in their first race at Holmdel, a course with which the Maroons hope to gain familiarity at the State Group championships and State Meet of Champions.

"There's some degree of a learning curve, and they get a little bit of a pass," Ryan said. "A couple of those guys know they could have done a couple things differently to affect that outcome, and I think next time they'll be more aware of what



FILE PHOTO COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Ridgewood junior Billy Byrne placed fifth in a tri-meet race against Indian Hills and Northern Highlands on Monday. Indian Hills won the meet and the regular-season Freedom Division title, but the Maroons are hoping to get even with a win in next week's Freedom championship meet.

exactly they need to do to get different results."

But for now, the Maroons will turn their focus back toward their division rivals, especially Indian Hills, for next week's Freedom meet, and Ryan knows his squad will have to perform at its very

best to challenge for the title.

"When you're running against such a good team like Indian Hills, everything's got to fall into place," the coach said.

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PHOTO/ROBIN GOTTESMAN

Sophomore Hannah Fishbein finished ninth in the Freedom Division meet. The Maroons will run in the Bergen County Group Championships on Saturday at Darlington Park.

GIRLS XC from C1

places as the team's top two runners and showed the reason why once again in the division race. Finishing only behind Indian Hills senior Julia Guerra (18:47), Halvorsen and Martin posted times of 19:16 and 19:18, respectively, to guide the Maroons.

However, Ridgewood received solid races from all seven of its runners.

Fishbein placed ninth with a time of 20:41, starting a parade of Maroon finishers in the race as Keyes clocked 20:53 to take 10th and Rosenfeld, a senior captain, finished in 21:00 for 11th. After Highlands' Bridget Zimny placed 12th, Ridgewood junior Sophia Sheehy grabbed 13th in 21:10 and sophomore Meghan Adams took 14th in 21:19.

"It's pretty obviously that Sam and Olympia are among the elite in the county, so they're going to have a faster opening mile than the rest of the pack," said Opremcak. "Sam and Olympia beat all the Highlands girls, and then our pack had to break up the remaining part of the Highlands team, so that's exactly what they did."

Highlands' best finishes came from twins Monica and Isabel Hebner in fourth and fifth,

while Paige Wilderotter came in seventh. But all seven of the Ridgewood runners placed ahead of the Highlands' fifth-highest finisher.

"That was kind of a race that really shows the team nature of cross-country," Opremcak said.

The team turns its focus to the county meet, which the Maroons have dominated historically, winning 29 group titles, including in each of the past five years. Ridgewood's top runners also have had some success in the meet.

Last year, Halvorsen and Martin finished fourth and fifth, respectively, in the Bergen Group A race, securing points crucial to Ridgewood's first-place team finish. And in 2013, Halvorsen, then a sophomore, took individual gold to lead the Maroons.

All that is history now, and the Maroons will be looking to improve.

"We have to know what our race plan is and to run our race but to be aware of girls that we're competing with," Opremcak said. "We know who is running for Highlands. We know where we have to be in relation to them and we just have to step it up a bit more."

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GIRLS CROSS-COUNTRY

Ridgewood rolls to recapture division crown

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

One of the best girls cross-country rivalries in North Jersey in recent years appeared front and center again at last week's Big North Freedom Division meet, as Ridgewood held off a hard-charging Northern Highlands squad.

Senior Sam Halvorsen and junior Olympia Martin finished 2-3 to lead the Maroon contingent and the pack of sophomore Hannah Fishbein, freshman Cassie Keyes and senior Leah Rosenfeld placed ninth through 11th to edge the Highlanders, 35-43, in another close team battle.

With the win, Ridgewood reclaimed the division title won by Highlands in 2014 and now have captured five of six division championships since the Big North Conference was formed in 2010.

Ridgewood head coach Steve Opremcak acknowledged his team's feat, but knows there is plenty of season left.

"Because of the history of the program, I think the older girls on the varsity, especially, understand that that's one of six or seven really important races and the start of a long journey," Opremcak said in a phone interview Tuesday. "It's important, but it's the first step of many as we go and hopefully end up back at regionals again this year."

The next major step will occur this weekend in the Bergen County championships on Saturday at Darlington Park in Mahwah, and if the past provides any indication of what's to come, the Highlanders will be the Maroons' top threat for the Group B crown.

"Northern Highlands is an excellent team," Opremcak said. "They probably ran their best race of the year, better than they had competed against us in the dual meet. They improved more than we improved, but fortunately we just had a better pack at the end there."

Ridgewood edged the Highlanders, 27-30, in the teams' Oct. 5 dual meet at Darlington and needed to be just as strong last Thursday.

Halvorsen and Martin have cemented their

See GIRLS XC, page C3



PHOTO/ROBIN GOTTESMAN

Junior Olympia Martin placed third in the Big North Freedom Division meet to help the Maroons capture the team title.

BOYS XC from C1

thin margin, 27-28, two days later in the season's final dual meet.

"I've told them a couple times this season, we're both really talented teams, and it comes down to who wants it more and who runs smarter," Ryan said. "So far, Indian Hills has run smarter, and maybe they've wanted it a little more."

Ridgewood will have another shot at the Braves in the Bergen County championships tomorrow

at Darlington.

The race will look a bit different this season, as nine-time defending champion Don Bosco now will race in the non-public only Group A, while Ridgewood is now in Group B.

"We really don't know how it's going to affect it," Ryan said of the Ironmen's absence from the race. "Obviously, the team aspect of it opens up pretty wide."

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PHOTO/ROBIN GOTTESMAN

Ridgewood junior Billy Byrne, second from left, clocked 16:24 to place first in last Thursday's Big North Freedom Division meet.

BOYS CROSS-COUNTRY: FREEDOM DIVISION MEET

RHS junior takes gold

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Ridgewood High School's Billy Byrne ran one of the best cross-country races of his life in an Oct. 5 meet against Indian Hills and Northern Highlands.

But in what RHS head coach Patrick Ryan called "one of the fastest dual meets I've ever seen," Byrne's time of 16:11 was only good enough for fifth, with even two of his teammates finishing ahead of him.

The Maroon junior would get his due 10 days later, as Byrne claimed individual gold in the Big North Freedom Division race last Thursday at Darlington Park in Mahwah to continue his strong midseason surge.

"He's kind of been knocking on the door all year of being a great runner," Ryan said about Byrne in a phone interview Tuesday. "Going back the last two races, he's run his second fastest time ever at the dual meet at Darlington and won the [division] meet and beat guys who've run under 16 minutes."

The exciting thing is that Ryan doesn't think Byrne has even reached his peak.

"He's not there yet; he's a very good runner," the coach said. "But that's something that I've been waiting for the last couple of months — to have him

have a bit of a breakthrough race and to realize he shouldn't be running behind those guys, he should be running with those guys."

Unfortunately for the Maroons, even though Byrne clocked 16:24 to edge Indian Hills' Matt Cohane by one second, the Braves ended up claiming the Freedom team title, 29-34.

Steven Fiumefreddo of Indian Hills placed third ahead of Ridgewood's Kenneth Marshall (fourth) and Nick Barnabic (sixth).

Meanwhile, a group of four Braves finished seventh through 10th, ahead of the Maroon group of Brad Rynkowski, Jonah Naftzger and Ben Zamboldi, who came in 11th through 13th.

"Indian Hills has been hot all year, but we did not run our best," Ryan said. "Some of the guys were not in it as much as they needed to be right away."

"If you're too far back in mile one, and you're trying to play catch-up in mile two and three, before you know it, that finish line comes up pretty quick," the coach added.

The Freedom race represented the third installment of this year's rivalry between Ridgewood and Indian Hills, ranked third and first, respectively, in *The Record* Top 25.

The Braves bested the Maroons at the Oct. 3 Shore Coaches Invitational, then won by a razor-

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SPORTS

GIRLS CROSS-COUNTRY: BERGEN COUNTY GROUP CHAMPIONSHIPS

RHS seals sixth straight title

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

The Ridgewood High School girls cross-country team keeps powering ahead of its competition, and for the time being, it doesn't look like there's much anybody can do about it.

The Maroons' latest triumph came this past Saturday at Darlington Park in Mahwah, where they once again outraced top rival Northern Highlands to take home the Bergen County Group B championship, 37-60.

"We can only control what we can control, and our goal was to have a better race, which we did as a team," RHS head coach Steve Opremcak said in a phone interview Tuesday.

The Maroons now have beaten Highlands three times on the year, including a regular-season dual and the Big North Freedom Division meet. In a historical context, the victory represented the program's sixth straight win at the county meet and the 30th in program history.

The Maroons' next challenge will come in the Lou Molino Bergen Meet of Champions (BMOC), which will be held at Darlington tomorrow. The program's track record in that event is nearly as impressive, as Ridgewood heads into the meet riding a streak of four straight titles and 28 overall in its history.

RHS will have a chance to add to its BMOC success thanks to the work of a deep lineup this past Saturday.

Olympia Martin led the charge for Ridgewood, clocking in at 18:33 to take second place behind Indian Hills senior Julia Guerra (18:26). The junior has elevated her performance this season, previously finishing sixth at the Shore Coaches Invitational and third in the Big North Freedom Division meet.

"This year, she just looks like a more experienced and powerful runner," Opremcak said of Martin. "That's clearly showing in her performance."

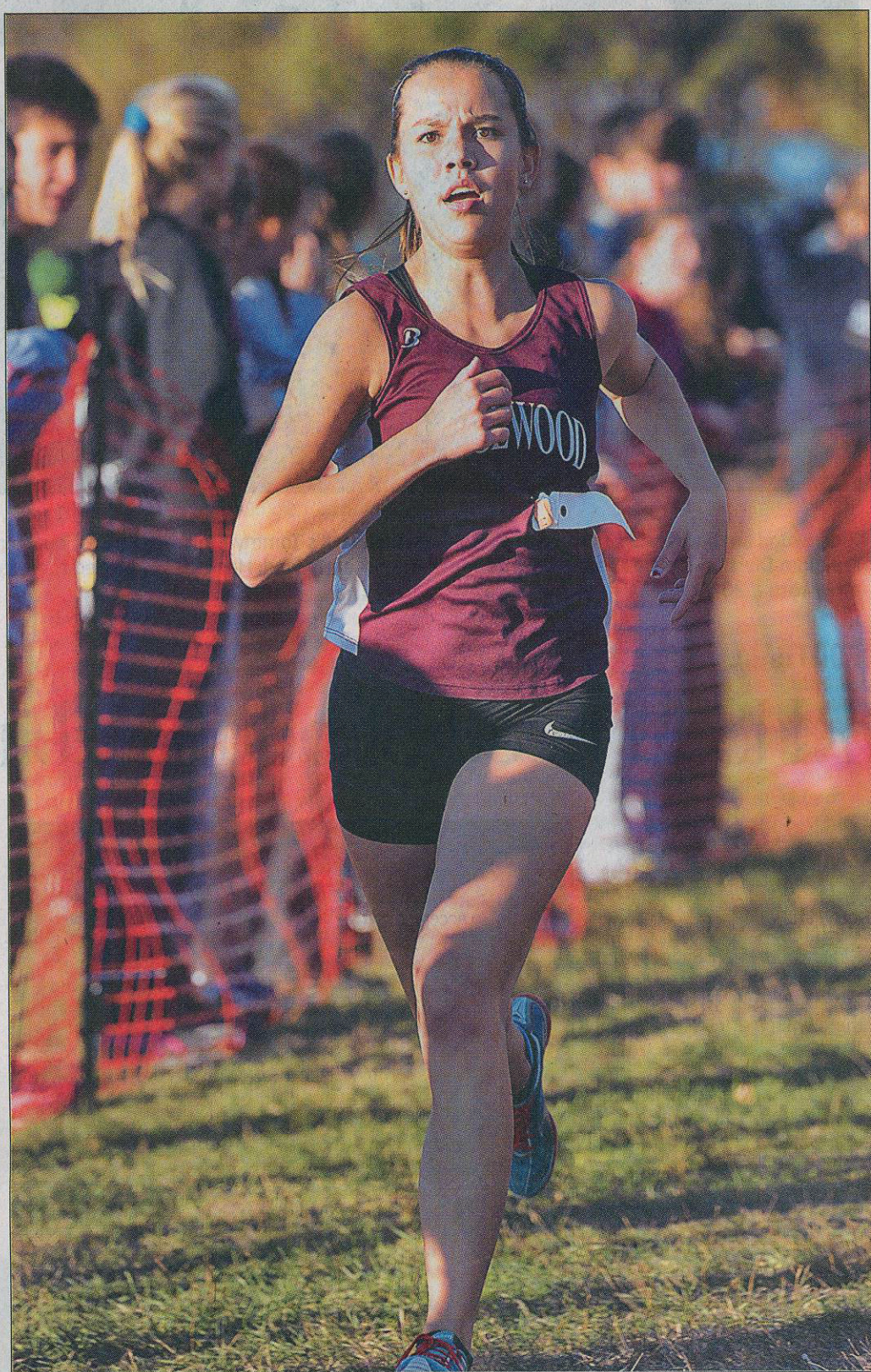
Martin was the first of four Maroons to crack the top 10, as senior Sam Halvorsen crossed the finish line in 18:54 to claim fifth place, while sophomore Hannah Fishbein (19:44) earned eighth and freshman Cassie Keyes (20:00) took 10th.

Halvorsen's effort was impressive especially when considering the adversity she faced early in the race.

"What most people don't know is that Sam took a complete fall the first about three-quarters of a mile," Opremcak said. "So we survived her wiping out completely and getting up and finishing."

Ridgewood has run its races this year with Martin and Halvorsen getting out ahead of the team's second pack of runners. Fishbein and Keyes stepped up in the county race, but so too have senior Leah Rosenfeld, sophomore Meghan Adams and junior Sophia Sheehy.

"They're starting to assume those really critical roles of being



PHOTO/ROBIN GOTTESMAN

Senior Leah Rosenfeld and the Ridgewood girls cross-country team are seeking a fifth consecutive Bergen Meet of Champions title Saturday at Darlington Park in Mahwah.

just an integral member of that pack and assume responsibility of helping their teammates," Opremcak said of the runners. "The group of five actually closed the gap [between themselves and Martin and Halvorsen] a little bit. We're continuing to focus on that and hoping they move even closer."

Of course, Opremcak also is hoping his premiere runners continue to improve as well.

"It's great because Sam's moving back to where she was, and they're both able to help each other," he said of Halvorsen and Martin. "Our goal is next week, they can work together and really help each other to their best performances of the year."

Ridgewood won last season's BMOC over Highlands, 45-66, and expects its rival to be the top competition for the crown. Halvorsen, Martin and Adams,

the only three returnees that ran in the race, finished third, ninth and 21st, respectively.

"I would expect us to continue to improve, and if you do that... I think we're going to have our best race of the year," Opremcak said. "Everything's pointing in that direction, but we have to do it."

RHS boys take second

The Maroon boys placed second in the Bergen Group B race, finishing only behind Freedom Division rival Indian Hills, 22-43, to qualify for the BMOC.

Junior Billy Byrne, coming off a gold-medal effort at the Oct. 15 division meet, placed third in 15:46 to pace Ridgewood.

However, the Braves received big performances starting with Matt Cohane (15:39) and Derek Barney (15:42), who took first and second, respectively. In total,

four Indian Hills runners completed the race in less than 16 minutes and six placed in top 10.

This year's race was exceptionally fast, with eight runners crossing the finish line in under 16 minutes, compared to just four in last season's Group A race.

RHS seniors Nick Barnabic (15:56, fifth place) and Kenneth Marshall (15:59, eighth) contributed with solid efforts, while juniors Jonah Naftzger (16:16, 13th) and Brad Rynkowski (16:20, 14th) rounded out the Maroons' top five.

The Braves now have bested RHS in four races this season, including the Shore Coaches Invitational, an Oct. 5 dual meet and the Freedom Division race. The teams will race again in the BMOC on Saturday.

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CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ridgewood runners get off to a fast start in last Saturday's county Group B race, won by the Maroons.

CROSS-COUNTRY

Maroon girls win 5th straight BMOC

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

There's nothing unusual about the Ridgewood High School girls cross-country team taking home the team prize at the Bergen Meet of Champions (BMOC), but head coach Steve Opremcak knew his team's winning performance last Saturday at Darlington Park in Mahwah wasn't your run-of-the-mill victory.

"The girls ran the fourth fastest team time in course history and if you really look at the times, they were only seven seconds from the second fastest time," Opremcak said in a phone interview Monday. "That would have been behind last year's amazing performance, so it was really one for the ages. The kids were just spectacular."

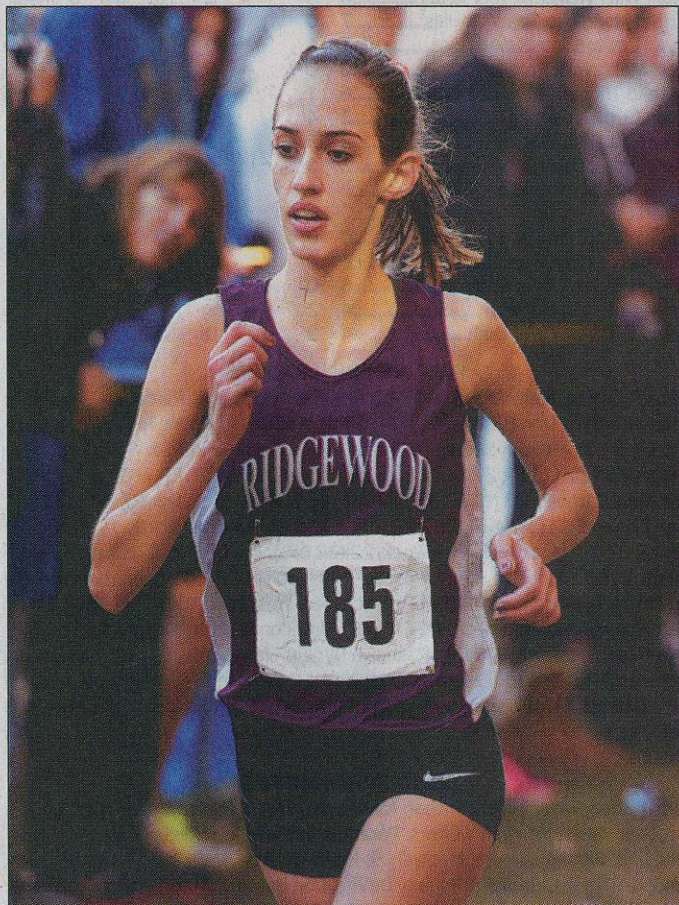
The Maroons' top five finishers clocked an average of 19:02.00, which blew away runner-up Northern Highlands' average of 19:45.40.

Junior Olympia Martin and senior Sam Halvorsen placed second and third, respectively, behind first-place winner Shannon Gorla of River Dell. A week earlier, Ridgewood's top duo earned second and fifth at the Bergen County Group B race on the same course.

The victory was the Maroons' fifth straight win at the BMOC and 29th in program history and served as the perfect transition to this weekend's North 1, Group 4 sectional meet at Garret Mountain Reservation in Woodland Park.

"The Bergen Meet of Champions is equivalent in competition, in many ways, to our strong section and even almost to the state group level," Opremcak said. "It's the springboard into the bigger pond of the state competition."

Despite the success of the Maroon runners on Saturday, the race didn't go according to plan. Ridgewood's usual strategy of keeping its runners in packs never came to fruition in a crowded BMOC field.



MICHAEL KARAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ridgewood senior Sam Halvorsen placed third in the Bergen Meet of Champions girls race last Saturday in Mahwah.

"It's really hard to keep your pack together, and our second pack really never formed in that first mile," Opremcak said. "We really don't know what happened and why we couldn't get together, but there's so many girls packed into a small area to start that race."

With the group broken up, each runner had to rely on her individual ability, which isn't a big concern for a team as talented as Ridgewood. In fact, the Maroons' top four runners, including 12th-place Hannah Fishbein and Meghan Adams in 18th, all improved their times by 29 seconds or more from the county meet held the previous week.

Martin's time of 18:00 just missed tying the all-time RHS girls mark at Darlington of 17:59, set last year by Halvorsen and

then-senior Carleen Jeffers.

Just as it had in the Big North Freedom and Bergen County Group B races, Northern Highlands represented Ridgewood's biggest competition in the BMOC. The Maroons handled the Highlanders in the first two races, which could have led to concerns about taking them lightly the third time around.

But Opremcak said such thoughts never crossed his mind.

"With these particular girls, the answer is no, because, one, they're so competitive, and, two, they understand the rhythm of the sport," Opremcak said. "They know exactly what the task is and what they have to do to accomplish it."

Ridgewood's task this week is

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BMOC from C1

to earn its second straight sectional title, which will require going through some tough but familiar competition.

"Our traditional rival Randolph is very strong again, and this year Montclair is equally strong, so it should turn out to be a three-team race," Opremcak said.

Ridgewood and Randolph have combined to win each of the past eight North 1, Group 4 titles, and the programs have alternated win-

ning the crown since 2009, with the Rams winning in 2009, 2011 and 2013 and the Maroons taking the championship in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

"Hopefully the strength of our pack, if we have all five of our girls running relatively together, is going to be the difference," Opremcak said.

Boys team takes third

The Maroon boys placed third at the BMOC with 78 points as Don Bosco edged Indian Hills,

55-61, for the team title.

Senior Nick Barnabic placed eighth in 15:49 just ahead of teammates Billy Byrne (15:53, 10th) and Kenneth Marshall (15:56, 11th).

Ridgewood, which has won five straight sectional championships, is expected to be among the favorites to win the North 1, Group 4 title at Garret Mountain on Saturday.

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Ridgewood sophomores Hannah Fishbein and Meghan Adams, far right, lead a pack of runners on the Darlington Park beach in last Saturday's Bergen Meet of Champions.

NORTH 1, GROUP 4 CROSS-COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIPS

RHS teams extend runs in sectionals

Girls grab
2nd straight
title behind
1-2 punchBY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Each of the past three weeks, the Ridgewood High School girls cross-country team has defended its title successfully at three major meets.

This Saturday, the stakes will be higher when the Maroons seek to capture a championship they haven't won since 1999, the State Group 4 crown, and in a wide-open field, head coach Steve Opremcak thinks his team has a shot.

But Ridgewood isn't alone.

"The difference this year is I see any of six teams possibly winning this race, and that's pretty crazy," said Opremcak, who mentioned North 2 winner North Hunterdon, Ridge, Central champion Hillsborough, South victor Kingsway and Shawnee as legitimate competitors for the crown.

Ridgewood earned its way to the race at Holmdel Park by winning the North 1, Group 4 championship for the second straight year, topping Montclair and Randolph in a three-team race, 57-64-67, last Saturday at Garret Mountain Reservation in Woodland Park.

The win also extended a successful four-week string in which the Maroons have won the Big North Freedom Division meet, Bergen County B race and the Bergen Meet of Champions.

Junior Olympia Martin delivered a historic performance, winning the race in 18:39, the 20th fastest time in course history and the best by a Ridgewood girls runner at Garret Mountain since 1984. Right behind her was senior Sam Halvorsen, last year's individual champion in North 1, Group 4, who placed second in 18:42.

"We were at our best or near it, and with the two top girls clearly running personal bests, we were able to have a real strong team



BRIAN HESTER/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Ridgewood junior Olympia Martin, right, and senior Sam Halvorsen finished 1-2 in the North 1, Group 4 race to lead the Maroons to a team victory.

effort," Opremcak said.

Sophomore Hannah Fishbein placed 11th for the Maroons, while classmate Meghan Adams (20th) and freshman Cassie Keyes (23rd) rounded out the team's top five. Senior Leah Rosenfeld (25th) and junior Sophia Sheehy (27th) also had good days for Ridgewood.

The Maroons needed every bit of effort from all their runners to hold off the hard-charging Mounties.

"Montclair had an amazing effort," Opremcak said. "That was their best race of the entire season by far."

Randolph, which has won five sectional championships since 2007, also presented a major challenge and the close race gave Ridgewood a taste of what's to come Saturday.

"We're going to have to have all seven be at their best this weekend coming up," Opremcak said. "It's just as tight a race as Group 4 has been in some time."

And it will occur on the "sneaky difficult" course at Holmdel Park.

"With the first, easily, 500 meters uphill, then you hit a series of rolling hills to the woods that end up to the high point of the whole course," Opremcak said. "That first mile is the whole challenge, because not only are you going uphill but the path narrows down, so you have to establish your position."

"But if you go out way too aggressively, then you're just in oxygen debt for the whole race and you just blow up."

Martin, Halvorsen and Adams all have experience at the difficult course from when the Maroons finished fourth in the Group 4 race and third in SMOC last season. In fact, Halvorsen has two top-10 finishes in the Group 4 race to her credit, placing sixth in 2013 and third in 2014.

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Boys' depth
crucial to
claiming
6th in a rowBY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Heading into last weekend's state-sectional meet, the Ridgewood High School boys cross-country team understood that it has been a victim of circumstance in 2015.

Although there's no arguing that the Maroons are among the top teams in the area, they had no major title to call their own this season, thanks in large part to an Indian Hills squad that outraced them in the Big North Freedom Division and Bergen County meets.

With the Braves running in the North 1, Group 3 race on Saturday at Garret Mountain Reservation in Woodland Park, Ridgewood knew it had a shot to capture the sectional crown in Group 4.

"I told the guys Saturday morning and Friday that they deserve to win," Ridgewood head coach Patrick Ryan said over the phone Tuesday night.

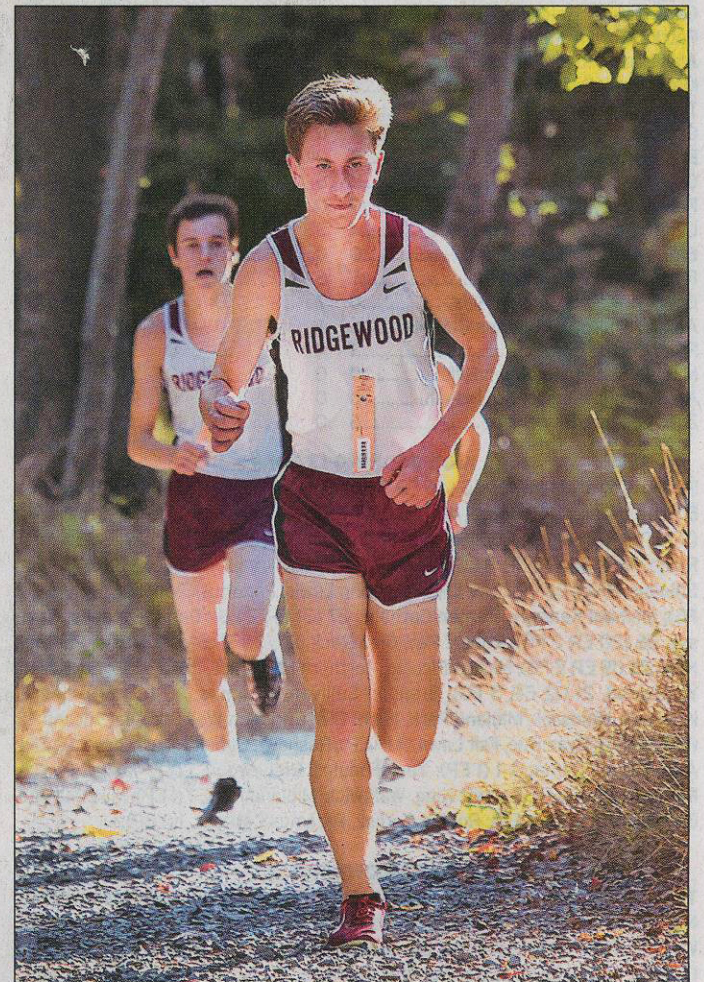
Depth made the difference for the Maroons, who despite ceding three of the top four spots to Morristown, won the meet, 46-77, over the Colonials.

Senior Nick Barnabic placed second in 16:31, breaking up the Morristown group of gold medal-winner Evan Quinn (16:07), third-place Eric Clay (16:34) and fourth-place Ben Edwards 16:35.

All seven RHS runners placed ahead of Morristown's fifth-best participant, and six crossed the line before the Colonials' fourth finisher.

"They've run as hard as they can the last couple weeks, and if this was a different year...we would have had a county championship," Ryan said of his team's runner-up finishes to Indian Hills. "It's tough to be so good but not be the best."

Ridgewood showed it is the best in North 1, Group 4, winning



FILE PHOTO/ROBIN GOTTESMAN

Senior Kenneth Marshall placed eighth in the North 1, Group 4 race to help Ridgewood claim its first championship at a major meet this season.

the sectional title for the sixth straight season and for the first time under Ryan, the first-year head coach who took over for the accomplished Mike Glynn.

Junior Billy Byrne placed fifth for the Maroons in 16:41, followed by the dependable senior Kenneth Marshall in eighth in 16:55. From there, the less-heralded but vitally important depth of the Ridgewood team took over.

"Going in, I told Nick and Kenny and Billy that [Morristown's top] three guys were comparable to them, and it was going to be very close," Ryan said. "I said we might go 1-2-3 on them, they might go 1-2-3 on us, or it might be somewhere in between."

"I told the back four that I thought they were better than Morristown's fourth and fifth guys, and for us to win, we could put six or seven [runners] in front of [the Colonials' fourth-best runner]," Ryan continued. "And we ended putting up seven in front of five and six in front of four."

Junior Brad Rynkowski and sophomore Sid Wagh crossed the finish line in 15th and 16th places, respectively, both clocking 17:07. Junior Jonah Naftzger (17:22, 20th) and sophomore Matteo Robazza (17:42, 35th) added solid efforts for the Maroons.

"It means a lot to be able to continue winning sectional championships as a Ridgewood coach," Ryan said. "But it also means a lot to me because they deserved it, and they were able to go get a championship."

RHS will run in Saturday's State Group 4 meet at Holmdel Park with a chance to advance to the State Meet of Champions (SMOC) the following weekend.

"On paper, we're probably about fifth right now," Ryan said of a talented field that includes North 2 champ Millburn, South winner Cherry Hill East and runner-up Cherokee and Central

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champion Old Bridge.

"Third place is really what we're gunning for. Old Bridge is way out; they're going to win the meet," Ryan added. "If we have a great day, maybe second is an option. I think we're really shooting for third."

Third place guarantees a berth in the SMOC, although the team

could still get there by grabbing one of the two wild card spots, given to the top two teams among all the groups.

"Probably, about 99 percent of the time, both wild cards do come from Group 4," Ryan said. "We don't want a handout bid. We want to be on the podium."

The Maroons placed a disappointing seventh in last season's Group 4 race with 196 points

compared to champion Cherry Hill East's 73. Ridgewood is hoping to make up for the poor finish and qualify for the SMOC as a team for the first time since 2011.

Marshall and Byrne finished 20th and 23rd, respectively, in Group 4 to qualify for the SMOC as individuals last season.

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RHS boys just miss first SMOC berth since 2011

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

In 2015, the Ridgewood High School boys cross-country team has become all too familiar with being, in the words of head coach Patrick Ryan, "so good but not the best."

Unfortunately, that trend continued last Saturday for the Maroons, who finished sixth in a deep field at the State Group 4 championships at Holmdel Park, coming up just 17 points shy of a second wild card berth that would have sent the squad to its first State Meet of Champions (SMOC) since 2011.

"We had a couple of guys run great and a couple of guys who didn't have great days," Ryan said in a phone interview Tuesday. "In Group 4, it's so good that if you don't have your best day, you don't have a shot."

Old Bridge won the meet with 54 points, followed by Cherry Hill East (81), Cherokee (135), Westfield (166) and Princeton (185).

Despite falling short of the SMOC, there was a silver lining for Ridgewood as junior Billy Byrne qualified for one of the race's individual wild card entries for the second consecutive season.

Byrne finished 16th in 16:32 as the Maroons' top runner and previously had shown his potential by winning the Big North Freedom Division meet.

"Sixteenth place in Group 4, it's impressive, especially for a junior," Ryan said. "He's starting to realize that he can be a big-time runner. I think he's got more in him for this weekend and he thinks so too."

Byrne was tied for the 34th best time among all the groups and Ryan hopes he can jump up a few places at the SMOC on Saturday.

"We think somewhere around 25th is what we're looking at this weekend," the coach said. "He's got to have a great race to do it, but we think that's definitely in the cards."

While Byrne will race once more, the group meet signaled the end of the high school cross-country careers of seniors Kenneth Marshall and Nick Barnabic, two senior captains who cracked the Ridgewood lineup as sophomores and entrenched themselves as top-three runners each of the past two seasons.

Barnabic capped his career with top-six finishes in the Freedom Division meet, Bergen County Group B race and Bergen Meet of Champions (BMOC), as well as a silver-medal performance at the North 1, Group 4 meet.

He added those accomplishments to a 2014 season in which he earned third at the sectional meet and second in the Freedom race.

Marshall also enjoyed a solid senior season, placing eighth in both the sectional and Bergen group meets, as well as fourth in the division meet. His breakout junior year in 2014 included a

See **BOYS XC**, page C3

Junior Billy Byrne placed 16th at the boys State Group 4 meet to earn a wild card berth in the State Meet of Champions for the second straight year.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

An Olympian effort



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Ridgewood junior Olympia Martin (No. 1395) runs alongside Montclair's Juliet Kohli (817) on her way to winning the State Group 4 individual championship last Saturday in Holmdel. Martin finished in 18:43 to become the first Maroon girls winner since 2001, while Kohli placed second in 18:50.

Martin becomes fifth Maroon to win race

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Even before Olympia Martin had a major meet title to her name, Ridgewood High School girls cross-country head coach Steve Opremcak knew she had made tremendous strides during the 2015 season.

"This year she just looks like a more experienced and powerful runner," the coach said days after Martin finished second at the Bergen County Group B race in late October.

Nearly three weeks later, those words appear to be an understatement after the RHS junior ran her way into the record books of North Jersey's most prestigious cross-country program.

Martin became the first Ridge-

wood girl since 2001 and just the fifth in program history to win a Group 4 title, claiming the crown in 18:43, ahead of Montclair's Juliet Kohli (18:50), last Saturday at Holmdel Park.

She joined Margaret Scutro (1984), Jenna Rogers (1993), Celeste Sedo (1997) and Clair Nowakowski (2001) as the only Ridgewood runners to win an individual group title.

"She's just been incredible this year," Opremcak said in a phone interview Monday. "Every single day she does everything she's supposed to do, so you know she's giving herself the best possible chance to run to her ability because she does everything right."

Martin's time was the third-best among all runners at the group championships, trailing only Mainland's Alyssa Aldridge (18:13) in the Group 3 race and Haddon-

field's Brianna Gess (18:41) in Group 2.

Senior Sam Halvorsen finished sixth in the race, bolstering the Ridgewood effort and making head coach Opremcak's pre-race premonitions to assistant Tom Hughes look almost spot-on.

"Here's the exact thing I said: 'I'm not going to be surprised if we have two girls in the top five,'" Opremcak said. "And I said, 'I'm not going to be surprised if one of them wins it.' That's how confident I was of our girls and how we're training."

Martin did win the race, continuing her season-long success that has caused her coach to marvel at her improvement.

"She has a joyousness to her," Opremcak said. "She just loves to run, she loves to compete and her confidence is growing, not only because of the success that she's

had, but she's worked really hard the last year and a half."

The dividends of that hard work are evident in Martin's improved time at the Holmdel Park course, where, as a sophomore, she finished 47th in 20:34 in last year's group meet and 49th in 19:48 at the SMOC.

Martin added the Group 4 victory to her win in the North 1 sectional race and runner-up finishes in the Bergen County B Division race and the Bergen Meet of Champions.

The Maroons finished fifth as a squad with 184 points. North 2 runner-up Ridge captured the team crown with 110 points, followed by Hillsborough (125), North Hunterdon (161) and Southern Regional (177).

However, Ridgewood still qual-

See **OLYMPIA**, page C2

BOYS XC from C1

gold medal at the North 1, Group 4 race after finishing fourth in the same event as a sophomore in 2013.

Marshall also reached the 2014 SMOC as a wild card entry.

"They're the veterans for a number of reasons," Ryan said of Barnabic and Marshall, the lone seniors racing at the varsity level at the end of the year. "We had a bunch of new guys on the team this year that never ran varsity before, and Nick and Kenny really were the two staples there."

With several of the Maroons' top contributors returning next season, the future looks bright for Ridgewood and Ryan, in his first season after succeeding former coach Mike Glynn.

"[We took] steps toward the big time really. We were knocking on the door for a couple of those meets," Ryan said. "You can't complain about a sectional championship and having one of the best teams in the history of the program."

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Ridgewood runners Leah Rosenfeld (No. 1397) and Cassie Keyes (1394) seek to gain some separation from Grace Kearns of Shawnee (1608) in last Saturday's State Group 4 girls cross-country race at Holmdel Park.

OLYMPIA from C1

ified for the State Meet of Champions (SMOC) by earning the second wild card spot, marking just the third time in program history that the Maroons have qualified for the SMOC three consecutive seasons (2003-06 and 2008-11).

"It's a testament to the focus of the girls and their hard work," Opremcak said. "We're hoping to have an even better day next Saturday."

Ridgewood received contributions from all four classes as sophomore Hannah Fishbein placed 29th in 19:54, freshman Cassie Keyes finished 62nd in 20:42 and sophomore Meghan Adams placed 106th in 21:34. Junior Sophia Sheehy and senior Leah Rosenfeld were the Maroons' sixth and seventh runners.

To race even better on Saturday, Opremcak is hopeful for the "wonderful coincidence of everybody having their best effort at

the same time." "The goal is to have the perfect day for everybody, everybody together at that time and place has their best effort," he said.

"I've been coaching a long time, and I can only say it's happened a couple of times in my career."

RHS did see a major surge in performance at last season's SMOC, led by ninth-place finisher Carleen Jeffers and 10th-place Halvorsen.

The Maroons came in fourth

in the Group 4 meet with an average time of 19:56.40. The following week, however, Ridgewood jumped to third in the SMOC, clocking in at an average of 19:36.80.

That effort marked the program's best finish in the event since 1999 – when the Maroons won their second SMOC title – and just the sixth-ever top-three team performance.

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Ridgewood all smiles after finishing in 4th

Martin claims silver; team moving on to Northeast Regionals this weekend

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Coming off a first-rate performance a week earlier, Ridgewood's Olympia Martin was happy to be No. 2 this time around at the State Cross-Country Meet of Champions (SMOC).

The Maroon junior finished second at the meet last Saturday at Holmdel Park, clocking in at 18:25, the second fastest time in SMOC history by a North Jersey runner, trailing only the 18:12 run by Josette Norris of Tenafly in 2013.

"It hasn't really hit me yet," said Martin, who the week before became just the fifth Ridgewood girl ever to win the State Group 4 meet.

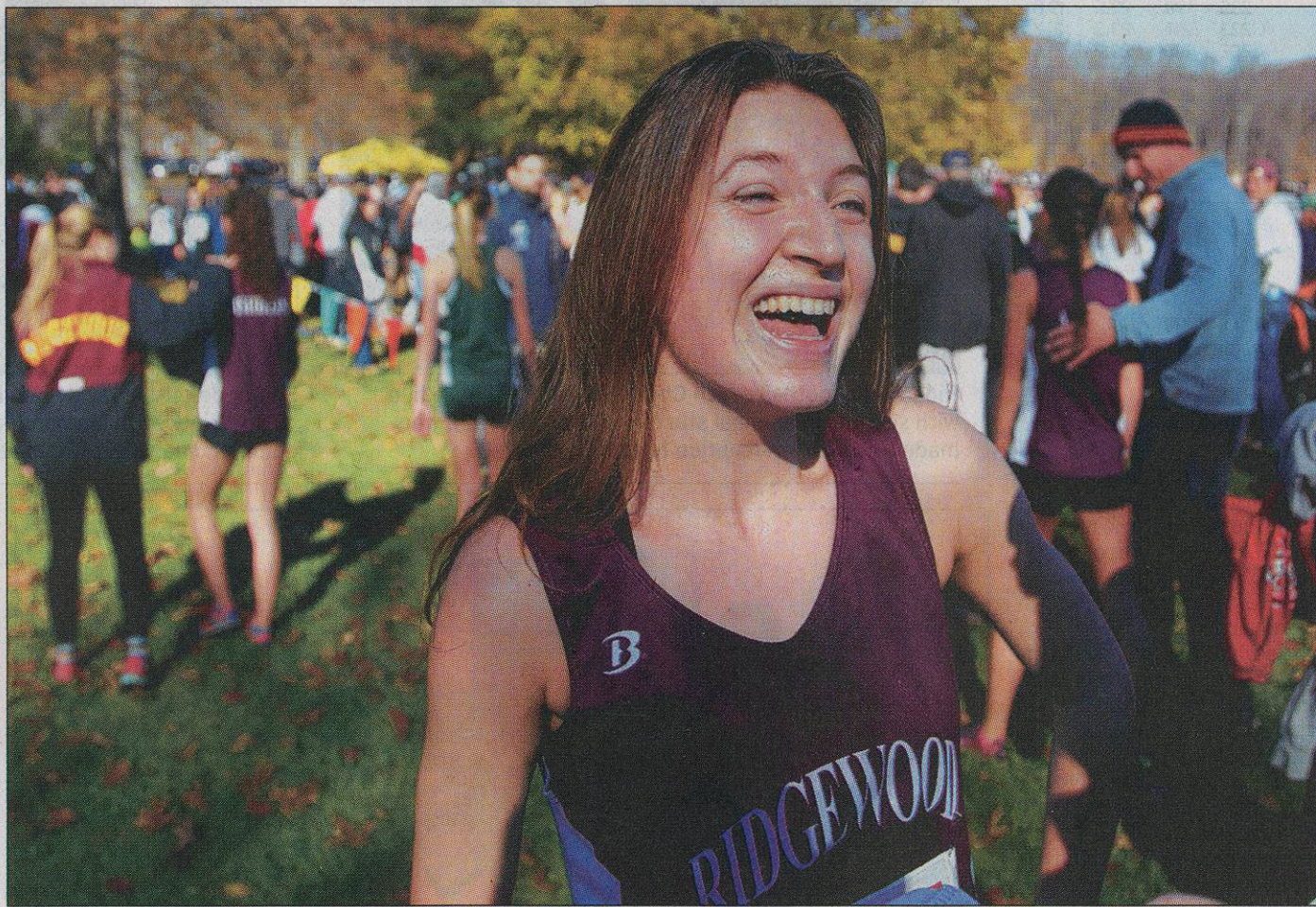
As a team, the Maroons finished fourth with 162 points, improving on their fifth-place effort in the Group 4 meet.

"We ran even better than last week," Ridgewood head coach Steve Opremcak said in a phone interview before practice Monday. "We didn't achieve the perfect race yet this season, which is almost impossible, but we had a strong effort."

Group 4 champion Ridge won the SMOC team title with 72 points, followed by Hillsborough (103) and Southern Regional (124).

Senior Sam Halvorsen placed 16th in 19:06 and sophomore Hannah Fishbein crossed in 36th place in 19:37.

Sophomore Meghan Adams and freshman Cassie Keyes registered the Maroons' fourth and



NOAH K. MURRAY/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Ridgewood's Olympia Martin celebrates her second-place finish at the State Meet of Champions last Saturday at Holmdel Park. The junior completed the race in 18:25, the second-fastest time ever by a North Jersey girl.

fifth best times.

Ridgewood will continue its season tomorrow in the Nike Northeast Regionals at Bowdoin Park in Wappingers Falls, N.Y.

The race gives Martin another chance to continue her tremendous individual season. Running the same Holmdel Park course she conquered a week before, the junior rode that momentum into the SMOC race.

"I was racing against the best runners that I ever met in my life and I was excited to see what I

could do," she said in a phone interview Sunday.

Martin didn't make her move until the race's second mile after surviving the always-challenging opening at the Holmdel course.

"The first mile was a bit stressful for me, because it was much more fast-paced than the previous race," she said. "It was all very intense and I could feel the energy in the air."

But into the second mile, the junior began to make her way toward the front of the pack.

"The second mile I went more into my pace and then passed a couple girls," she said.

Alyssa Aldridge of Mainland won the race in 18:07, and Martin just beat out Haddonfield junior Briana Gess at the finish line to take silver.

"Overall, it was a very intense race and very fast race. It was over before I knew it," Martin said.

All year, Opremcak has marveled at Martin's improvement from her sophomore season and the junior has noticed significant

differences in the way she approaches competition.

"Honestly, I think it's been my self-perception," she said. "I'm much more confident in my abilities and drive to win than last year."

"I think last year, I was still trying to figure out who I was as a competitive runner," Martin added. "This year I know what I need to do to get my game face on and to really get the best out of every race."

Thanks to Martin, the strong

return of Halvorsen – who missed last year's winter and spring track seasons with a concussion – the emergence of younger runners like Fishbein, Keyes and Adams, and the solid efforts of veterans like Leah Rosenfeld, Ridgewood has made Opremcak's first season at the helm a successful one.

"We're not yet really in the reflective time of year yet, but my mind's starting to get there a little bit," said Opremcak, who took over for the legendary Jacob Brown during the summer. "And I don't think anybody thought this team was going to do anything at the top levels of competition in the state or county."

In fact, at the start of the season, the Maroons were projected to be only the ninth best team in the state based off the 2014 times at Holmdel Park.

"We were constantly just getting statistics piled against us and we showed that we could do better than anyone ever expected us to be," Martin said. "That meant so much to us."

Last season, Ridgewood finished ninth overall at the Northeast Regionals, and third among New Jersey teams. Halvorsen crossed the finish line in 14th place, while Martin came in 41st. The Maroons are hopeful they can do even better this season and perhaps earn a trip to the Nike Cross Nationals in Portland, Ore.

"We have the opportunity to do something a little more challenging," Opremcak said. "Now we get to run against the best in the Northeast and to see what we can do. That in itself is pretty darn exciting."

Byrne reaches goal

Ridgewood's Billy Byrne placed 25th in the SMOC boys race, as he significantly improved upon his time at the Holmdel Park course

See SMOC, page C3

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2015

SPORTS



NOAH K. MURRAY/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Ridgewood senior Leah Rosenfeld hugs head coach Steve Opremcak after the Maroons placed fourth in the State Meet of Champions. Rosenfeld, a senior captain, finished the race in 21:36.

SMOC from C1

from the State Group 4 meet.

After the Maroon junior finished 16th at the Nov. 14 State Group 4 finals with the 34th-best

time overall (16:32), Ridgewood head coach Patrick Ryan said he hoped Byrne could crack the top 25 at the SMOC.

Byrne, the only Maroon to earn a wild card berth, accom-

plished the mission by clocking 16:20. He was the fifth-highest finisher among Bergen County entrants.

The performance also represented a marked improvement

from his trip to the SMOC last season, when he finished 68th with a time of 16:48.

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SECTION

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FRIDAY,
DEC. 4, 2015

GIRLS CROSS-COUNTRY: NIKE NORTHEAST REGIONALS

RHS wraps up year with top-10 effort

BY MATTHEW BIRCHENOUGH
Assistant Sports Editor

Ridgewood High School girls cross-country head coach Steve Opremcak already has moved on to his duty as a winter track assistant coach, but he knows it will be hard to forget what his team accomplished this fall. And he's not ready to let go just yet.

"We're just going to bask in the glow of our accomplishments. I think that's where we are right now," Opremcak said in a phone interview Monday, the first day of winter track practice.

The Maroons placed ninth as a team at Nike Northeast Regionals last Saturday at Bowdoin Park in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., matching the effort by last year's squad at the event.

"It's so satisfying to have done that, to have this group challenge themselves and respond and end up being ninth in the Northeast," Opremcak said.

Junior Olympia Martin capped her tremendous year with one more accomplishment, finishing 11th in 18:57.1, the fastest time ever run by a North Jersey girl in the Northeast Regionals.

Meanwhile, in her final high school cross-country race, senior Sam Halvorsen placed 27th with a time of 19:27.4, nearly matching her time from a 14th-place effort at the meet in 2014.

Remarkably, five of the seven Ridgewood runners – and four of the five qualifying scorers – ran the second half of the five-kilometer race faster than the first.

"We're basically the only group of girls that ran the second part of the race faster," their coach said. "That's one of our goals that we coach, to recognize where you are



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Junior Olympia Martin (No. 2572), seen above in the State Meet of Champions, concluded her historic season by registering the fastest time in history by a North Jersey girl at the Nike Northeast Regionals, held in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., last Saturday.

physically and run your opening mile at that appropriate pace, because you get a very accurate assessment of what you can do and then go for it.

"We did that exactly. It was awesome."

Martin led the way in that regard, running a second-half split of 9:23 after reaching the halfway mark in 9:35. The junior just missed out on a trip to the Nike Cross Nationals in Portland, Ore., but her season has been historic, even for a program as well-regarded as Ridgewood.

"We knew she was a talented kid," Opremcak said. "We knew she had done the summer preparation work, so she was able to

sort of reap the harvest of all that work. It was just a revelation."

Her North Jersey-record time at Regionals can be added to a 2015 resume that includes a second-place finish at the State Meet of Champions and an individual victory at the State Group 4 meet.

"She's in a place where she's comfortable extending herself and exploring whatever her capability is on that day. There's a fearlessness to her," Opremcak said. "There's an amazing combination where she's totally unafraid to challenge herself and she takes joy in doing it."

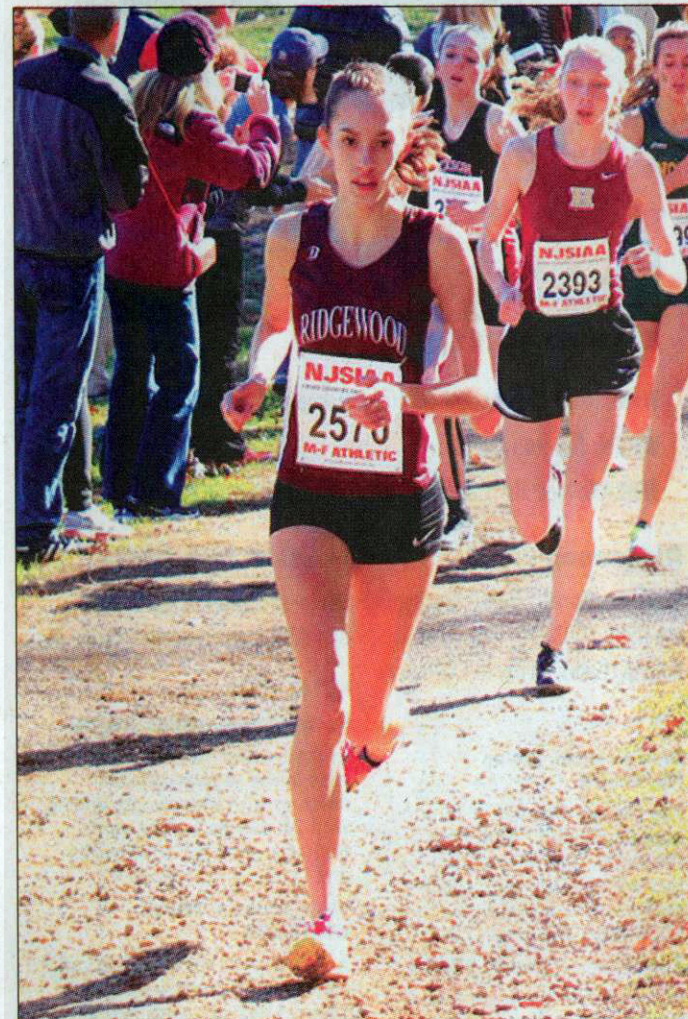
The young trio of sophomores Hannah Fishbein (20:30.3) and Meghan Adams (21:13.5) and

freshman Cassie Keyes (21:26.8) finished third through fifth among Ridgewood runners, while junior Sophia Sheehy (21:37.5) and senior Leah Rosenfeld (22:23.2) also ran solid races for the Maroons.

In Opremcak's first season after succeeding Jacob Brown at the helm of the program, Ridgewood was expected to remain among North Jersey's best. However, there were doubts about a team that lost three top runners to graduation.

As far as Opremcak is concerned, his team's appearance in the Northeast Regionals capped a season of exceeding outsiders' expectations.

"It's the external acknowledge-



Ridgewood's Sam Halvorsen finished her high school cross-country career by finishing 27th in 19:27.4 at the Nike Northeast Regionals.

ment of what we knew," the coach said. "We've known this about us the entire season, and we kept getting stronger and keep developing this deeper trust in each other."

"The whole running world sort of finally noticed us."

The coach wouldn't quite say the 2015 season turned out per-

fectly, but it was pretty close.

"Did we reach 100 percent of our ultimate potential? Probably not, but maybe we were at 98," Opremcak said. "We came as close as you could come to it. It was pretty perfect that way."

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