

Bednar, Polam, CBA, Haddonfield Reign Supreme At Holmdel

HOLMDEL INVITE

Holmdel Invitational

[Jim Lambert](#)

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Girls Recap

[Charlotte Bednar](#) vs. [Angelina Perez](#) was hyped up as potentially the fastest duel in Holmdel Park history.

The titanic matchup more than lived up to its billing as the two juniors burned up the legendary 3.1-mile layout with two of the greatest performances in state and course history at Wednesday's Holmdel Invitational.

The meet (which will be remembered as the unofficial State Meet of Champions) was organized by longtime Bergen Record sportswriter Paul Schwartz to fill the void left by the cancellation of the NJSIAA Meet of Champions, a casualty of the pandemic shortened season. All athletes and teams were competing unattached and for clubs at this meet.

Bednar and Perez produced one of the most memorable showdowns in NJ XC history.

In her first XC race since she was eighth at Team Nationals last December, Bednar, a junior at [Lawrenceville](#), pulled away from the previously undefeated Perez over the final mile and came charging across the line first in 17:21! That smashed the NJ course record and is the No. 2 time in Holmdel Park history.

Perez, a junior at [Lakeland](#), finished second in 17:36, tied for No. 4 in course history!

Bednar's 17:21 broke Holmdel's NJ record of 17:28 that [Megan Venables](#) of Highland Regional ran to win the Group 3 title in 2013. Only the great [Katelyn Tuohy](#) of North Rockland, N.Y. (a mind-boggling 16:21 at the 2018 Shore Coaches Invit.) has run faster on the legendary layout.

[Christina Allen](#) of [River Dell](#) made the girls race even more stunning when she capped off her remarkable rookie campaign by placing third in 17:50 to make this the first girls race ever at Holmdel with three runners going sub 18.

Allen's 17:50 is the second fastest time ever run by a freshman girl at Holmdel, and is tied for No. 13 all-time. [Briana Gess](#) of [Haddonfield](#), who ran 17:45 to win the Meet of Champions title in 2013, is the only freshman to run faster than Allen at Holmdel. Allen ran 40 seconds faster than she did when she placed second in 18:30 at the N.J. Sec. 1 Group 2 race when she finished 59 seconds behind Perez.

How did the Bednar-Perez clash go down?

Bednar charged out to the lead right away up the start hill with Perez right on her shoulder. Bednar held a 5- yard lead on Perez as she hit the first mile in 5:47. Bednar opened a small gap on Perez on the big downhill going into the bowl, and held a five second lead when she made her way to the top of the bowl. The lead stayed at five seconds when Bednar passed the two-mile mark in 11:20.

Bednar methodically pulled away over the final mile to secure the victory.

Bednar, whose school cancelled fall sports this season, has been tearing up the track this season with state record times of 16:21.97 for 5K and 9:20.98 for 3K.

"I was nervous before this race because it was my first cross-country race in almost almost a year and I haven't run any hills," said Bednar, who ran 18:00 at Holmdel at the Shore Coaches meet last year. "I knew it would be a tough race because she (Angelina) has been running great all season. I just wasn't sure what to expect. I just tried to stay in front time and I just kept pushing."

Perez's 17:36, tied on Holmdel's list with the legendary Janet Smith of J.P. Stevens, the 1983 Foot Locker National champ, was fast enough to win every M of C girls race ever run since the race went to 3.1-miles in 1978.

"Today was an amazing race for me," said Perez. "I couldn't have asked for a better way to end the season. As much as I was nervous about competing against an amazing runner like Charlotte, I was also excited to have someone to push me. I don't think I would have been able to run as fast as I did without her. My goal was to stick with her for as long as I could, and I was able to do that. I gave it all I had and left it all out there, so I'm very happy with how I raced."

Perez, who set the course record at Garret Mountain this season (17:29), said she was eager for some redemption after running 18:46 at the Group 2 State Championships at Holmdel last year.

"I didn't have a good race here last year," said Perez. "So I really wanted to prove to myself that I could run fast her and show how much I've improved since last year."

The highly anticipated clash for the girls title was a tight battle between the state's top teams with No. 1 Haddonfield emerging with 52-65 victory over No. 2 Ridgewood.

Haddonfield was trailing, 27-35, after each team had four runners across, but Haddonfield picked up 18 points at the No. 5 spot to rally for the victory.

Haddonfield went 3-5-7-17-20 and averaged a South Jersey record 19:31 to secure its first No. 1 state ranking in school history.

The Dawgs were led by senior [Sarah Naticchia](#), seventh with a Holmdel PR of 18:50. Senior [Allison Colflesh](#) was 13th in 19:07, senior [Payton Weiner](#) was 15th in a Holmdel PR of 19:11.

Freshman [Anne Earp](#) ran 20:05 for 31st, and sophomore [Helene Usher](#) came up with a clutch 35th place finish in 20:22, to clinch the victory. It was the first time that either Earp or Usher ran the full 5K course at Holmdel.

The Haddonfield girls learning about the team win.

Haddonfield coach Jason Russo was ecstatic with the way his girls ran, and with how they handled the very difficult circumstances that this season presented.

"I just look back at these kids in general and know the sacrifices they make day in and day out for our sport," said Russo. "When Covid struck, I know how much these athletes were affected. I also know the new sacrifices they've made since the pandemic. Sometimes training independently, racing with less support and limiting exposure just so that they can keep competing. This season has been an unending dream. To conclude the season as the top team in the state was beyond our wildest dreams. To have one more opportunity as a club team, working under very different conditions - to be disciplined enough to remain focused and race the best in the state at legendary Holmdel. As Coach (Nick) Baker would say - "it was the ultimate pay check for them. The look on their faces afterwards and sense of accomplishment - for me was just incredible. I just keep watching the video of the announcement. It'll never get old."



BOYS RECAP

The boys race provided plenty of fireworks as well with [Vidhur Polam](#) of [South Brunswick](#) and No. 1 ranked [Christian Brothers Academy](#) throwing down sensational performances.

After sitting on favored [Jackson Barna](#) of Ridge through the opening mile (5:07) and through the bowl, the UPenn-bound Polam, who was nursing a sore shin and banged up toes, made a bold move coming out of the bowl as he surged by Barna right before the two-mile mark.

Polam, through two miles in 10:05, then hammered his way around the tennis courts, and continued to pour it on as he made his way down the back hills and onto the final straightway before stopping the clock with a huge PR of 15:32. That's tied for No. 20 in course history and just one second off the Middlesex County record of 15:31 that [Tim Ball](#) of Piscataway ran to win the M of C title in 2011.

Senior [Matt Bogdan](#) of [Colts Neck](#) rallied for second with a huge PR of 15:40, No. 3 in school history. Barna, a junior, was third in a Holmdel PR of 15:48.

Polam dropped a 26 second Holmdel PR to score the upset victory. Barna defeated Polam in their only other meeting this season at the Colt Invitational at Holmdel last month, 15:50 to 15:58.

"The last time I raced Barna he got me at the end of the race as we were coming out of woods," said Polam. "My coach (Wil Rivera) told me after that race that I can't wait until the end like that. I have to make a move earlier to give myself the best chance to win. So I started thinking about that as we were coming out of the bowl and decided this was the time I needed to take a chance. Most runners are hurting coming out of the bowl, so I figured maybe I could take advantage of that and go for it. And it worked out perfectly."

Polam, whose 15:32 would have won all but nine of the M of C races since the course at Holmdel was extended to 5K in 1978, said he wasn't really thinking about dropping a massie PR when he took the line.

"I was just focused on trying to win and get under my PR here of 15:58," said Polam, who only started running XC last year. "I never thought I'd run 15:32."

In the team competition, CBA, ranked No. 1 all year, solidified its place as the state's top pack with a hard-fought victory over No. 2 Ridge, 48-64. CBA finished the season 3-0 vs. Ridge.

CBA, which averaged 16:22 and had a 1-5 spread of 51 seconds, picked up six points on Ridge at the No. 3, No. 4, and No. 5 spots to secure the victory.

CBA's top five were senior [Chris DeSousa](#), fourth with a Holmdel PR of 15:55, senior [Ben Santos](#), eighth in 16:16, senior [Sean Elliott](#), 15th in 16:28, sophomore [Nick Sullivan](#), 16th in 16:28, and senior [Dan DeMasi](#), 31st in 16:46.

Ridge, with just two seniors in its top seven, had its best race in school history at Holmdel with a 16:26 average.

Although it won't officially count as the fourth straight title and state record 25th overall M of C title for the Colts, its victory cements its place as the No.1 team in the state and adds to CBA's remarkable legacy as the No. 1 program in state history.

CBA coach Sean McCafferty said his team deserves a ton of credit for staying focused and keeping it eye on the prize through COVID-19 shutdowns and an unprecedented and unpredictable season caused by the pandemic.

"It's been a challenge this year," said McCafferty. "But the boys, to their credit, really stepped up. The Monday after sectionals we sat down with the guys and told them that they have to really want this and go after it. They were very excited to run this race, and they were pumped to be part of it. Ridge is a very strong team and they ran great. We had to run very well to beat them today."

McCafferty said one of the keys to victory was the way the Colts finished.

"We were out really fast at the 1,000 mark, and I was a little concerned," said McCafferty. "But they closed really, really well. We do a workout here in that gets them ready to finish fast, so they were comfortable when it came time to close."

The CBA seniors accomplished a very rare feat.

"The seniors on this team have never lost in cross-country to a team from New Jersey," said McCafferty. "We talked a lot about that, and how this was that important race to finish off their cross-country careers undefeated."