

Track & field: These athletes stood out at the Bergen County Championships

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OLD TAPPAN -- Summer came to Bergen County a week before the Memorial Day weekend, and that was good and bad for the 1,000+ athletes at the Red Littler Bergen County meet.

That was great news for the sprinters and jumpers and even some of the throwers as fast times from runners like Donovan Anderson of Bergenfield, Adrian Taffe and Fabian France of Bergen Catholic, Carly Sorvino of Emerson, Abigail Dennis of NV/Old Tappan, Bella Sing of Rutherford and Kiley Mironenko of Waldwick.

It wasn't as great for distance runners in the hot, muggy air but River Dell's Amanda Mircovich and Cresskill's Danielle Tilp and Ridgewood's Sean Fortunato didn't seem to mind much.

Team winners were Ridgewood's boys and girls in Division A, the boys for the fourth time in five meets and sixth overall, the girls for the fourth straight time and 20th overall. The boys defeated NV/Old Tappan, 157 1/2-112 with

surprising Bergen Tech nipping Ramapo, 69-68 for third. The girls upset #1 Northern Highlands, 150-139 with Ramapo third at 85.

Northern Valley/Demarest swept the B division, the boys winning for the fourth straight time and 16th overall and the girls earning their second straight win and 10th overall. The Norsemen boys defeated Fort Lee, 130-73 with River Dell at 71. The Norsewomen overwhelmed River Dell, 224-120 1/2. Ramsey was third at 72.

Cresskill boys edged Westwood, 114-109 in C, the closest of the ten divisions, clinching the title when Oliver Urena took third and Joshua Yoon tied for fifth in the high jump, cancelling out the Cardinals seven wins and four seconds, mostly from the trio of Marcus Cheema, Connor Munson and Justin Napier. It was the Cougars' fifth title overall but first since 2009. New Milford edged Hasbrouck Heights for third, 64-62 1/2.

The Hasbrouck Heights girls won their first title since 2017 and ninth overall. The Aviators defeated Westwood, 182-78 with Rutherford third at 76.

Emerson easily swept the D divisions, both for the third straight time. The boys have earned nine overall titles, the girls four. The Cavo boys beat Midland Park, 124-84 with Waldwick, Bogota, Park Ridge and Becton all over 60 points. The girls outscored the next three teams with 204 points. Midland Park was second with 69 followed by Waldwick with 53.

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And IHA and Bergen Catholic continued to dominate the E division, IHA winning its eighth division and BC it's 12th. BC held off a stubborn and rapidly improving Don Bosco squad, 191-180 with Paramus Catholic a distant third with 73 points. IHA defeated Paramus Catholic 239-160 with Holy Angels next at 126.

Unsung Heroes of A Long, Hot Weekend: Boys Edition

For the Ridgewood boys look to Jay Boogaert, Sean Halvorsen and Red Kossick. The senior Boogaert, scoring personal bests in the 800 (2:00;63), 1,600 (4:26.55) and 3,200 (9:45.78) for 22 total points, while the senior Halvorsen had a 13 foot personal best in the javelin for third at 152-5 and sophomore Red Kossick was second in the 110 hurdles in 15.37 and the 400 hurdles in 58.59.

"Jay's been struggling and grinding all year but now he's in a good mental place and he's getting the results he deserves," said Ridgewood boys head coach Patrick Ryan.

For NV/Demarest it was soph Andrew Tandler who made the finals in all four events he was in. Tandler tied for second in the high jump at 5-8 and fifth in the triple jump (40-7 1/2) and made the finals in both the 110 hurdles and long jump.

Coach Mike Theuerkauf also spotlighted junior thrower Joe DeCroce, who took seconds in the shot (50-9) and discus (148-4), both big personal bests. "He's really starting to come out of his shell," Theuerkauf said. "He's a big time football prospect and he's going to be a big time thrower. He's trying to figure out how to control his big body in the circle."

Cresskill coach Chris Woodford singled out senior shot putter Anthony Coleman who took a surprise fourth in the shot to go with his fourth in the discus and the 1-2-5 finish in the javelin led by a winning throw of 158-5 by surprise winner Joe Toto.

"But if it wasn't for freshman Josh Yoon we wouldn't be talking about winning this," said Woodford. "He was second in the 100, was fourth in the triple jump and tied for fifth in the high jump and he's come through for us all year."

Emerson's Mark Ledgerwood couldn't single out one or two. "Kevin Legaspi got us four big points in the triple jump and Jude Mazzola, one of our

pole vaulters and one of our senior leaders, stepped in on the winning 4-x-800 relay and Khalid Itani PR'd in the 800 and 1,600 and we pulled him from the 3,200," said Ledgerwood.

Unsung Heroes of A Long, Hot Weekend: Girls Edition

Steve Opremcak pointed to several factors in the Maroon's upset of No. 1 ranked Northern Highlands, with versatile athletic performances from junior Hannah Brodsky, who won her first major title in the 100 hurdles and stepped in to run a strong leg on the 4-x-100 relay. He also singled out freshman Bea Brassel who added the 400 and high jump to her 400 hurdles success.

"Coaches sometimes see potential in athletes doing events that the kids never see and our kids understand that if they learn different events that they can help themselves achieve individual goals in their better event," said Opremcak. "We have a lot of kids who are willing to do that."

Opremcak also pointed to junior Lily Williams, who had a tremendous weekend with a personal best 5:08.00 in the 1,600, finished second in the 3,200 and then ran a strong third leg in the 4-x-800 to give the Maroons the lead in the event they went on to win.

For just the second time in the long history of top performer awards given at the Jack Yockers Bergen County Relays went to members of the same team.

But Saturday, Mike Ippolito wanted to talk about the two seniors who were overshadowed a little by their less experienced teammates.

"Casey Walter was lights out in the distances, " said the Demarest girls coach. "Her times were not amazing (although she PR'd in both the 1,600 and 3,200), but the way she ran her races was. She is not afraid to take risks or to have big goals and she makes a push for the win every time in every race."

Julietta Ambartsoumian is probably the best discus thrower in North Jersey. "But when a younger kid comes up and beats her in the shot like Casey

Sullivan has, she embraces it," said Ippolito. "She hadn't thrown javelin since freshman year and she came to me before County relays and said I think I can be a top 3 javelin thrower for the team. Let me do it, we need the points. And at the meet she took second."

If there's a team that excels at finding those must have unsung heroes it's Hasbrouck Heights which every year seems to find those diamonds in the rough. This year it's juniors Megan Napolitano, Devon Sonzogni and Isabella Drezek.

"Napolitano is one of those kids who because she hadn't competed in two years, you weren't sure how she might have developed in an event like the pole vault," said head coach Rob Brady. "She hadn't picked up a pole since last winter (2019-2020) and just went at it and tied her personal best. And she ran the 100 hurdles so well, we were able to keep Amber Barrios out of the event.

"We found so many kids like her this year," Brady continued. "(junior) Devin Sonzogni stepped up in the pole vault and 1,600 and Isabella Drezek pr'd for us in the 800, 1,600 and 3,200 and got 20 points."

Emerson's Ledgerwood gave a shout-out to seniors like Allie Lachman, pole vaulters Jessica Coyle and Alexi Gitto, Emma Callagy and the Dul twins Eliza and Emilia who combined for more than 50 points.

"With a back-to-back like we have in our league (the NJIC divisional championships are Monday and Tuesday, we have to kids like those to try and win both titles," said Ledgerwood.

IHA coach Matt Joyce had several younger kids get to the next level over the weekend, with sophomore Lauren Dunnigan's 35-10 1/2 triple jump, just 1/2 inch short of the school record in just her fourth meet of her career.

But he preferred to single out less heralded seniors like Jillian Shea, Geri Tabbachino, Cristine Ajao and Elizabeth Pinto Shaw for preparing future stars

like Dunnigan and mentoring a team that like all teams had lost so much in the last year.

"They've been so great in preparing the girls to actually be at a meet," said an obviously proud Joyce. "These kids have taught them a lot of track, and how to compete in a meet like this."

Zuckerman Sets County Record

Max Zuckerman stood on the pole vault runway at Depken Field in Hasbrouck Heights late Friday afternoon with the longest and heaviest pole he'd ever vaulted with, a pole he'd never used before and contemplated history.

The Pascack Hills junior was making his second attempt at 15 feet 8 inches, a height no North Jersey vaulter had ever cleared before, but there was a confidence that the mark wouldn't last much longer.

"As soon as they put the bar back up and gave me the thumbs up to go. I took a sip of water, picked up my pole and went," said Zuckerman.

Moments later he had taken the county record away from former teammate Liam Landau, currently a sophomore at Northeastern University.

"Once I started jumping today I felt good about (breaking the record), said Zuckerman, who had clinched the Division C win at the Red Littler Bergen County Relays at 14-6 and then made 15 feet easily before attempting the record height. "When I got over 15 and hadn't blown through my poles I kind of knew. My form was good and I had a lot of height."

He made his first attempt at 15-8 with the same pole that he cleared 15 with and got great height but missed.

"I knew if I switched to the new pole (stiffer allowing for more control) I could comfortably get over so I went with it."

The clearance was clean and the record was his.

"As soon as I got my hips over the top of the bar I knew I had made it," said Zuckerman, whose clearance also qualified him for the Nike Outdoor Nationals at Eugene, Oregon in early July. "There was a lot of pressure to break the school and county record and qualify for Nationals so I wanted to get it as soon as possible. I'm glad I got it done now."

Zuckerman, for the second time in 10 days (he cleared 15-6 in a dual meet May 11), took a shot at 16 feet and his first vault Friday was a good one.

"I had the height put my standards were too far back. Then I started to cramp up and the next two vaults weren't good."

But he's still got several meets left over the next six weeks and lots of chances to take the record even higher.

Anderson and Markman go long

It didn't matter which site they were at, the boys long jumpers went really long on Friday. Nineteen boys went 21 feet or longer at Hasbrouck Heights (Divisions B and C) and Old Tappan (A, D and E) and four went 22 feet.

But Bergenfield's Donovan Anderson and Waldwick's Rashawn Markman went even longer.

Markman jumped a Division D record 23 feet 8 1/4 inches on his second attempt to break a 24 year old mark at the Old Tappan site, the ninth best jump in Bergen County and third longest in the state this year.

At about the same time, about 15 miles away, Anderson was jumping 24 feet at Hasbrouck Heights to move into sixth place all-time on the Bergen County list. It's the top jump of the year so far in New Jersey.

Have a day, Hassan Bailey

There are career days and then there's the day Hackensack junior Hassan Bailey had at Old Tappan.

Coming into the A division discus on Friday, Bailey, who has been a consistent performer all season in both the shot and the discus, had a personal best in the latter event of 133-9, good for 55th in the state, 10th in North Jersey and second ON HIS TEAM. A nice season, but nothing that even hinted at what was to come.

His first throw Friday was 138 feet, his second in the 140s and then one his third throw, "he nearly threw it out of the facility, throwing an amazing 166 feet.

But Bailey wasn't done. Two throws in the 140s and 150s followed and then for his final throw of the day, 167 feet even, top throw in North Jersey this year, ninth in New Jersey and one of the top 50 performances in Bergen County history.

"It's unbelievable," said Bailey, who tried not to beam while he was bursting with satisfaction after his stunning series. "I've been working on my technique and I saw I was getting better. In practice I've been throwing 150s a lot and then in a meet recently I threw over 150 and I fouled it. I said to myself today's the day I get it."

"When I threw the third throw, the official said 166 and I didn't know what to say," said Bailey, a linebacker on the Comet football team. "Then I threw 167 and coach (Jim Levitzke) said he was going to call (school record holder and Nigerian Olympian Stephen) Mozia and tell him I was going to get his record."

"I don't know about that but I know I want to keep getting better."

Halfway through the meet with nine of 18 events scored, Ridgewood leads NV/Old Tappan, 85-66 with Ramapo a distant third with 29 points.



Veterans and rookies make their marks (and times)

Brynn Madonna is one of the veterans on a surprisingly young and talented Northern Highlands team. Meet in and meet out, the University of Connecticut-bound Madonna delivers her throws with the consistency of the star that she is.

But she's been a little frustrated lately, seemingly stuck in the 38-39 foot range.

Friday, she threw a personal-best 41-0 1/4 to win the A shot put, and thinks it's the beginning of a big rest of the season.

"I've been focused on consistency instead of distance and I've been throwing well," said Madonna. "My throwing coach has told me several times that it creates a path to better throws and the last two meets with the shot put have me hoping it carries through to my other events.

"This week of training has been more quality than quantity in my throws and my arm feels pretty good."

While Madonna is a veteran performer, NV/Old Tappan's Abigail Dennis is a most impressive rookie.

Dennis ran the fastest 100 of the day, a personal-best 12.61 seconds into a headwind and made her pitch as the area's top sprinter in her first ever major individual meet.

"I started running junior track when I was 10 years old," said Dennis, who started swimming competitively even before that. "I always loved to run and I found out I was good at it."

"I still swim (in high school) and it's been good cross-training for me," said Dennis, who finished sixth in the 400 despite tweaking her calf late in the race. "I have good lungs now."

Through eight events, Northern Highlands leads Ridgewood, 63-57 with Ramapo hanging close with 48 points.

Ballen doubles, Castillo and Nelson impress

One of the few double winners on the first day of the meet was Midland Park's Jason Ballen, who won the D division discus by more than 40 feet with a solid 153-1 performance and the javelin at 143-6.

It's clear the junior prefers the discus. During the quarantine that followed the start of the pandemic, Ballen bought three discuses of his own and when it was allowed, he got to the high school track to throw several days a week until practice finally resumed in late February.

"I would put a tape measure down at a mark I wanted to reach and would throw each of them and then do it again," said Ballen, who went from a freshman best of 107 feet in 2019 to a school record 161-2 at a tri-meet last

week. "I didn't expect to go after the school record until next year but I'm going to have to reassess my goals."

Jordyn Nelson of North Arlington won the girls D long jump in a tie-breaker with Kiley Mironenko of Waldwick and took third behind Emerson standout Carli Sorvino in the 100. And Ridgefield freshman Kylie Castillo announced her presence with a second-place finish in the 100 and a school-record and gold medal-winning 59.57 in the 400.

After nine boys events, Emerson leads Midland Park, 77-46 with Park Ridge with 32 points. Emerson also leads Waldwick, 81-37 in the girls meet through eight events. Park Ridge is third with 26.

Bergen Catholic and IHA grab early leads

Bergen Catholic used career-best performances from javelin thrower Alex Ust (170-8), long jumper Jaden Ebanks (22-0 1/2) and sprinter Fabian France (10.99) to open a 98-81 win lead over Don Bosco, with Paramus Catholic next with 48 points.

IHA won five of eight events and leads Paramus Catholic 112-63 with Holy Angels next at 55 points. Paramus Catholic's Briana Thomas won the shot with a throw of 39-3 1/4, her best throw since her sophomore year.

NV/Demarest leads River Dell, 87-60 1/2 with Ramsey third with 35 points in the girls B team race. Hasbrouck Heights leads Westwood, 84-34 with Rutherford next with 24 in girls C.

The boys races are closer with NV/Demarest leading Fort Lee, 42-32, after eight events with Ridgefield Park (31), Mahwah (31) and Bergenfield (29) still close in the B division.

Westwood leads Cresskill, 57-52 1/2 in the C division with Hasbrouck Heights next with 33 points.

Paul Schwartz covers high school track and field for NorthJersey.com. For full access to live scores, breaking news and analysis from our Varsity Aces team, subscribe today. To get breaking news directly to your inbox, [sign up for our newsletter](#) and [download our app](#).

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