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East captures third place

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By **daniel chamness** For The Courier News

PEORIA -- November 8, 1998 was one of the greatest days of Denise Hefferin's young life.

November 8, 2008 is definitely a close second.

On Saturday, the Hefferin-coached St. Charles East Saints finished third place in the IHSA Class 3A State Finals. The Saints finished third with 197 points. They were topped in the largest class by nearby Geneva (51 points) and Hinsdale Central (166).

However, 10 years ago, Hefferin was a runner for the Saints and she helped her school put the giant gold trophy in the case as they won the state title.

"I thought we were capable of a finish like this," said Hefferin. "Today is proof of mind over matter. Grace Gordon, Holly Robertson and Dayna White have been nicknamed "Our Wall of Saints". They are the reason we made it, they are the reason that we did so well in the post season."

While Hefferin was confident in a great finish, the cross country pundits that put together the rankings were not as confident. St. Charles was ranked 11th in the final poll of the year. While "Our Wall of Saints" did their job, the success started with Lizzy Hynes.

Hynes, who has been a force in the state for four years, finished seventh with a three-mile time of 17:20. The winning time of 16:54 was posted by Lindsay Flanagan of Lake Park.

"I did not run a terrible race, but I wish I could have done better," said Hynes. "I was exactly where I wanted to be at the mile (5:30), but I did not feel it today. I have other cross country races (Foot Locker-Midwest Race) and then I am looking forward to track and field."

Freshman Mallory Able was the Saints' second runner to finish. Abel toured the course in 18:00, which was good for 38th overall. Then "Our Wall of Saints" took over. Only three seconds separated the three runners.

Gordon took 70th with a time of 18:12. She was immediately followed by Holly Robertson (73rd, 18:14) and Dayna White (76th, 18:15). The three runners only had 171 team points between them and it was enough to give East third place.

"Lizzy was our leader," said Hefferin. "She always made sure that the girls knew exactly what needed to be done."

Since winning the state title in 1998, East had not been in the top three.

Besides East, three other runners, all girls finished in the top 25 in various classes.

Bartlett's Alyssa Schneider holds the distinction of finishing in the top five. The sophomore finished the race in 17:12 as the Hawks took 16th overall as they scored 378 points.

"This was a learning experience for us as a team and for Alyssa," said Beth Emody, the head coach at Bartlett. "It was one of our first times down here. Alyssa wanted to finish with the leaders. We have nine of our top 12 runners back and I am looking forward to next year."

In the Class 2A, Hampshire junior Holly Plitchta finished ninth with an 18:06. Margo Richardson from downstate Mt. Vernon finished first with a 17:41.

Five runners in Class 2A broke 18:00. Burlington Central's Maggie Gannon, who is also a junior, finished 19th in the Class 2A girls competition. She crossed the finish line in 18:25.

"This was an average race for me," said Gannon. "There is not much more I could have done today. I would love to be in the top five in one year."

As a team, Burlington Central finished 10th, scoring 263 points. Springfield-based Sacred Heart Griffin finished first with 87 points. Crystal Lake Central (90) and East Peoria (99) were second and third respectively.

"This is the culmination of the hard work we have done this year," said Burlington Central coach Vince Neil. "When I crunched the numbers, this is where I thought we could realistically finish."

St. Charles North's boys team finished in the top 10 for the fourth consecutive year. The North Stars finished eighth with 312 points. The team title was won by Naperville North, which scored 84 points. York finished second with 85, while Geneva took third with 95 points.

"These guys all season long have had a vision of what they could become collectively," said North coach Steve Imig. "We did not go into the meet full strength and that hurt us. We needed all our guys to have a great day. We are happy to be included in one of the most competitive state meets ever. We are hoping to be back in one year."



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