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Successful 1st day for Norville

8 local individuals, 2 relay teams move on to Day 2

CHARLESTON – How much did that Bulldog need a window? Consider the way Batavia senior Melissa Norville played it coy on Friday afternoon.

She competed in the 300-meter hurdles knowing she had scratched on her first two triple jump attempts and could use some recovery time for a third try. The jumping pit beckoned as the preliminaries of the IHSA Class 3A Girls State Track Meet wound down, but so did strategy and pride.

"I feel like I should do something good for the team since I am the team right now," Norville said. "I know people are coming down to watch tomorrow, so I feel like I should bust my butt for Natalie and Kat and Sampson and Julia Gross, who were so close to coming down."

That explained Norville's choice to slug a few extra cups of water before strolling the grounds to find Bulldogs coach Chad Hillman. Hobbled teammates Natalie Tarter, Kathryn Warner, Alexis Sampson and Gross now can watch her in two finals when they travel to Eastern Illinois University this morning. Norville later nailed a qualifying jump of 36-0.75 to go with her run of 45.3 in the 300 hurdles.

Seven other Chronicle area individuals and two relay teams advanced to the 2A or 3A finals as the sport continued its first state weekend under the three-class system. Those athletes who fell short of qualifying stuck out another stuffy night in the dorms to support their teammates while soaking in their own achievement.

"It's just so much preparation," said St. Charles East junior Danielle Kuzniewski, a 200 runner unable to make the cut. "This is finally the day where it comes together. Now that it's finally happened, I feel good that I've worked this hard and I finally get to show myself how hard I've worked."

Geneva capped such a day by exorcising one of last year's demons in the final event. The 4x400 relay team, returning three members from the group that fell short of the 2008 finals by one-hundredth of a second, recovered to win its heat in 3:54.61 and move on.

Junior Erica Miller entered the third leg with the Vikings in a third-place hole but quickly made up ground and took the lead. Anchor Sammi Hill padded Geneva's advantage but still had to fight off a closing Emma Grimes of Lyons, who eventually finished just .06 behind.

"I saw her coming and I saw people screaming," Hill said. "I had to use every last drop of energy and get that one step ahead."

Geneva's 4x800 relay will compete in the finals, as well, joining pole vaulter Allie Pace and triple-threat Alissa Dappas, who advanced in both hurdles events and as the second leg in the 4x400.

Dappas' three fellow area triple-qualifiers experienced different results. After falling short in the 100 hurdles, Norville edged East's Maya Rittmanic by a quarter of an inch in the triple jump to keep the junior from the finals. Rittmanic, who also made the prelims in the long jump, will compete only in the high jump finals.

In Class 2A, standout senior Lindsay Gierke paced Kaneland by advancing to the finals in each of her events: the 100 (12.35), 100 hurdles (15.02) and 300 hurdles (46.13). Andie Strang also moved on in the 800 for the Knights, running 2:22.15. Jordan Pinkston qualified for the finals in the pole vault, but Sara Wallace did not.

Ditto for St. Charles North sophomore Meredith Beird, her school's lone qualifier, who missed the 3A finals despite matching her career best height of 10-0.

East senior Lizzy Hynes will shoot for a pair of state titles today in the 1,600 and 3,200, but she especially looks forward to competing in the mile against four-year rivals Rebecca Tracy of Barrington and Heather Olson of Warren.

"It's cool to see the freshmen still kicking it out as seniors," Hynes said. "It's going to be a very competitive race, and whether I win or whether I don't, hopefully someone is going to put up one of the best times of the year."

Tarter joined Hynes as a four-time state qualifier but was a surprise omission on Friday. Some in the crowd murmured when

public address announcer Matt Piescinski told the crowd her heat lane would be open.

A Wisconsin recruit who won the 300 hurdles title as part of Batavia's third-place team finish a year ago, Tarter attempted to compete but did not travel with Norville and Hillman. A pulled hamstring, knee problems and an illness piled up down the stretch to doom a snake-bitten senior season.

"I feel bad for her because she's always been nothing but nice to me," Dappas said. "I think that her senior year could have ended better than what it has, but I wish her luck."

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