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BOYS' CROSS-COUNTRY PREVIEW

Belen Jesuit boys' cross-country aiming for fourth consecutive state title

Despite losing three All-Dade first-team runners, Belen looks strong enough to win a fourth state title in a row.



BY ANDRE C. FERNANDEZ
A1FERNANDEZ@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Teams in sports like football and basketball can easily intimidate opponents with their size and speed, even before a game.

Belen's cross-country team draws looks of awe before it even runs onto a course from just its sheer numbers.

Fielding its largest high school roster ever -- 47 runners -- Belen's cross-country dynasty appears poised to claim its fourth consecutive state championship this season. The streak of three in a row is already a record for a Miami-Dade County boys' team.

The Wolverines were moved to Class 3A, where they will be the only Dade team in the classification.

"We're very fortunate to have kids that have been in our program for years and have developed by learning from others that have come before them," Belen coach Frankie Ruiz said. "The teams are a little different this year,

but the goals are still the same for these kids."

The Wolverines, however, are still the favorites, entering the season ranked No. 1 by flrunners.com. Belen lost three All-Dade first-team runners -- Joe Dorfman, Lazaro Fields and Larry Duran -- but returns talented sophomore Elliot Clemente, whom many expect to become one of the county's top all-time runners before he graduates. Clemente is the closest Belen has to an individual state title contender, although it never suffered last season following the graduation of former state runner-up Guillermo Echarte.

Sophomore Branden Martinez, juniors Gabriel Loret de Mola and Joe Lindsey should ensure that the Wolverines have one of the top squads in the state for the next couple of seasons.

The most likely candidate to vie for an individual state crown runs for Columbus -- Dade's other defending state team champion.

Junior Armando Del Valle won nearly every major meet last season, and returns after a state runner-up finish in Class 4A. Del Valle leads an Explorers' squad that returns three more of its top runners from last season -- Mark Gulesian, Dominick Cabrera and Andrew Sheehan.

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