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Chiles girls, Leon boys, the class of area cross country

BY AIMEE SACHS • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 19, 2008

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If there's one thing Big Bend cross-country coaches can agree on this season, it's this: Chiles girls and Leon boys are the teams to beat.

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"The girls, on paper, could be the best team we've ever had," said Chiles coach Scott Gowan.

Gowan says freshmen Carly Thomas and Lilly Williams are ready to compete on the varsity level, joining nine other girls on the varsity roster.

But not all of the Chiles girls will be able to run in their first meet of the season, the Mountain Dew Invitational at the University of Florida on Saturday. Sophomore Jodie McGruff has been out of commission for a month with a quad strain.

"That's really hurting us a lot," Gowan said. "We've got to get her well to have a good team."

Gowan is rebuilding his boys team this year after losing five to college. The Chiles boys were also state runners-up in 2007. Freshman Taylor Buzzard joins the group of 13 boys, led by seniors Andrew McWilliams and Daniel Rolfs.

"Those guys are very inexperienced," said Gowan, who still expects the boys to make it to state. "We are young, but we can still get there and make a little noise."

Leon junior Matt Mizereck will definitely make some noise in 2008. As a sophomore, Mizereck was an individual state champion, setting a course record with a time of 15:30.

"Matt's just a tremendously talented kid, and he works hard," said Leon boys coach Andrew Wills. "A lot of kids have talent, but he works hard too."

2007 was a memorable season for the entire Leon boys team, as the Lions were Class 3A state champions. Wills hopes Mizereck will help the Lions repeat, with the help of sophomore standouts Will Stanford and Riley Doherty.

The Leon girls were also successful in 2007, placing third in the Class 3A state meet. This year, Leon girls coach Allison Eagen is counting on senior Claire Stodghill and sophomore Brook Eubanks to lead the way.

"We have a long way to go," Eagen said. "But if all goes well, we should be able to qualify for the state meet again."



Matt Mizereck, Leon cross country runner; he was athlete of the week Sept. 21, 2007.

IMPORTANT DATES

- District meets: Nov. 3-8.
- Region meets: Nov. 13-15.
- FHSAA Finals: Nov. 22, Little Everglades Ranch, Dade City.

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Maclay had a strong 2007, when both the girls and boys teams were district and region champions, and both squads finished third in the Class 1A state meet.

Maclay coach Gary Droze says his top returning runners are sophomore Patrick Swain for the boys and junior Jana Stolting for the girls. The girls will try to avoid being the first Maclay team since 1995 to not make state, despite losing four of their top seven runners,

"It's a rebuilding year, but don't count us out," said Stolting, who finished first in the Cougar XC Challenge on Monday.

Someone who knows what it's like to lose a star runner is Godby coach Chris Sumner, who will try to make do with the loss of Joe Franklin to the University of Tennessee. Sumner says his boys are on a mission to prove they can still compete without one of the best runners the state of Florida has ever seen.

"Our guys still believe that we have a good shot to be a better team this year even without Joe," Sumner said.

One new Godby runner to look out for on the boys team is freshman Kendall Matthews, who Sumner discovered on the basketball court.

"He's been running about two weeks now and he looks like he can really run, he's just learning how to," said Sumner.

The Godby girls made it to regionals in 2007, and hope to go even farther this year with the likes of juniors Christine Poole and Johanna Forsyth.

North Florida Christian coach Jason Bowman has high hopes for his teams, especially with the boys squad being fronted by speedy senior Whitney Strickland.

"The team, we're pretty excited," Strickland said after his first-place finish at the Cougar XC Challenge. "This year we haven't lost anybody. Hopefully we'll finish the best we've ever had."

Other NFC senior standouts include Kenny Turner and Danny Linton.

There are only nine girl NFC runners, compared to 21 on the boys' side. Junior twins Danielle and Melissa Jackman will be hard to tell apart in races. The Jackman twins will be joined by Tiffany Kim, Sydney Wasdin and sophomore Hailey Baldwin.

Last year, the Lincoln cross country crew made it out of districts, but their season ended in regionals.

"We're real young," said Lincoln coach Perry Shaw. "Youngest we've been in a long time."

Shaw says his best boy runners are senior Cody Vencent and sophomore Connor Holcombe, while senior Courtney Whitehead will lead the pack of Lincoln girls.

Rickards coach Nathan Graham's top runners this year are dual athletes. Senior Harrison Nichols also plays baseball for the Raiders, and sophomore Jasmine Chin plays soccer.

"We are excited about this year and hoping to continue to build as the years progress," Graham said.

Another Big Bend runner to look out for this year is Wewahitchka's Billy Naylor, an impressive track runner who will compete in cross country for the first time this year.

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