



Schaefer sets pace as Hatters win Open

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EAST HARTFORD -- Tucker Schaefer and the Danbury High boys cross country team had the last laugh.

A week after he was disqualified at the state class meet for wearing the wrong jersey, Schaefer dressed for success and won the State Open with a command performance that helped the Hatters secure their third consecutive title and fifth this decade.

Schaefer, the school's first individual Open champion, broke away from a cluster of runners going up a steep incline known as the Green Monster about two-thirds of the way into the race and was never challenged thereafter. He completed the 5,000-meter Wickham Park layout in 16:01, outlasting New Fairfield junior John Raneri by 14 seconds and Joel Barlow senior Mike Levene by 18 seconds as area runners claimed the top three spots.

"This is the first year I did summer training and I guess it paid off," said Schaefer, whose seventh-place finish last year was the best among underclassmen. "I can't even explain it. It's been just a dream ever since I started and it came true. I remember watching (2007 graduates) Matt

(Terry) and Willie (Ahearn) run and it feels amazing. So much stuff was going through my mind today. In school I was so quiet. I was just focusing on the race all day. I think I was the most nervous kid here, just because of having the reputation of being the No. 1 returner."

Being the object of scorn on internet chat rooms for his uniform mix-up last week might have been the motivation Schaefer needed to make the difference.

"He wasn't overly confident that he was going to just run away from people but he definitely wanted to make a statement, I think more to himself than anyone else," DHS coach Rob Murray said. "Maybe what happened last week just helped prepare him a little bit better this week mentally."

Danbury, ranked third in the Northeast and 13th nationally in the Harrier's Super 25, needed its unparalleled depth to prevail on a day when the race plan went up in smoke. Levi Wallace (13th), Kevin Russell (20th), Chris Pristouris (40th) and Joey Bubniak (49th) also scored as the Hatters tallied 86 points. Shelton took second (116) and Amity, ranked No. 2 in the coaches' state poll, was third (122).

The outcome was in doubt because Joey Bubniak, who is normally the team's No. 2 scorer, and twin brother Danny, who is generally its No. 5, both were hampered by stomach cramps. Pristouris, typically the sixth finisher, figured in the scoring for the third week in a row, replacing Danny Bubniak this time.

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"If you've been around the sport enough you see a lot of different scenarios," Murray said. "In a way I am surprised because you want your guys to run consistently. At the same time, that's the sport of cross country. That's what makes it intriguing and exciting and that's why they run the races."

"It wasn't exactly as planning but we pulled through. We had a couple of guys step up," Wallace said.

Schaefer seized a 10-meter advantage on Raneri as they climbed the Green Monster and began to pull away.

"I kicked up the Green Monster and I heard Rob say, 'You can do it. It's your time to break them. Keep going. You've got it.' I kept going and no one came with me," Schaefer recalled. "Going across the rock wall I never slowed down I kept thinking in my mind, 'Wow, I'm leading by a good 40 meters. I have this.' And coming across the finish line shoot I remember looking back and they were still coming up the hill."

"Tucker just took off and I tried to follow him," said Raneri, last week's Class M state champion. "I just knew I was going to be runner-up. He was cruising around the 600-meter mark because he knew he had a 50- to 100-meter lead on me."

While Schaefer was running the race of his life, the Bubniak twins labored during the second half of the race. Both complained later of dehydration cramps in their abdominal cavity.

"They said their legs felt good," Murray noted.

Wallace, Russell and Pristouris ran well, especially considering it was the first State Open for all three.

"It just felt good knowing I was contributing to the team and realizing that I was one of the top runners in the state," Wallace said. "I didn't even expect really to be here, Even going into this year I was nervous and unsure of where I would be (in the lineup)."

Both Raneri and Levene insisted they were satisfied with their efforts.

"I tried my best, I'm only a junior and I have one year to go," said Raneri, who fashioned the best finish among underclassmen and therefore will be the boy to beat next year.

"It's really going to be a burden for me, probably," he said. "I'm just really happy right now. I don't really want to look forward yet."

Levene improved on last week when he had the 12th-fastest time overall.

"I felt better this week than last week," he said. "I can live with third. Third is good and I'm happy."

Senior Craig Hunt, of New Milford, who took 23rd in 16:43, was the only other area individual to qualify for the New England championships.

New Milford, the SWC champion, was eighth (243

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points), Ridgefield took 10th (264 points) and New Fairfield placed 18th (403 points).

The top 25 individuals and the top six teams move on to the New England meet at Derryfield Park in Manchester, N.H., next Saturday.

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