

Warsaw's Sectional Championship Streak Ends with Runner-Up Finish at Manchester

The Warsaw Tigers' streak of 15 consecutive sectional championships came to an end Saturday, as the Tigers finished runner-up at the Manchester Sectional. Despite placing all seven runners in the top 15, Warsaw was unable to overcome a strong front-running performance from Wabash, which placed four runners in the top five.

Wabash captured the sectional title with 32 points, followed closely by Warsaw with 38 points. Culver Academies finished third with 104 points, Plymouth fourth with 116, and Columbia City fifth with 134.

Leading the way for the Tigers was senior Jaxon Lehman, who finished fourth overall in 16:47.1. Junior Keenan Lyons followed in sixth (17:05.5), with senior Nolan Stump placing seventh (17:07.4). Sophomore Luke Vander Bie finished ninth (17:15.0), sophomore Eli Swinehart took 12th (17:32.3), senior Jack Boggs placed 14th (17:35.1), and freshman Brady Dewey rounded out the Tigers' lineup in 15th (17:38.0).

"Hats off to Wabash," said Warsaw head coach Matt Campbell. "For a school with an enrollment under 500 students to come out and put four guys in the top five is an impressive accomplishment. Their upperclassmen really stepped up, and they got a tremendous boost from a freshman who delivered an unbelievable performance. Credit to the Apaches. They earned it."

While Warsaw demonstrated its depth by placing all seven runners among the top 15, Campbell felt the Tigers weren't quite able to put together the complete team performance they had hoped for.

"Jaxon, Keenan, and Nolan all put together performances that ranked among their personal top three races of the season," Campbell said. "We had some really encouraging individual efforts, but collectively, we weren't quite at our best today. For the first time this season, we didn't have our top five within our typical 30-second spread. In a smaller field, that can make a big difference. We know what this group is capable of because we see it every day in practice. We just need to put it all together on race day."

Campbell also credited Wabash's aggressive approach and acknowledged that Warsaw needed to do a better job responding to the early pace.

"Wabash was extremely aggressive from the start, and you could tell how well prepared they were," Campbell said. "They came into this meet believing they could pull off the upset, and they raced with that confidence. We didn't quite match their aggressiveness early, and that's something we need to learn from. As coaches, we have to make sure our guys are prepared to respond to those situations, especially this time of year."

Campbell believes the Tigers have the talent to compete with the best teams in the regional field, but emphasized the importance of trusting their training and racing with confidence.

"We have a group of guys who train together, push each other, and are very close in ability. We need to trust that fitness and be willing to put ourselves in the race early. At this point in the season, there's no reason to be conservative. We need everybody racing with confidence, competing for every position, and approaching the race like we have nothing to lose."

Despite the disappointment of seeing the championship streak come to an end, Campbell believes Saturday's result could provide valuable motivation heading into the regional championship.

"Obviously, we wanted to keep that streak going, and it stings a little to see it end," Campbell said. "But sometimes a race like this is exactly what a team needs. We were only six points away, and there were opportunities throughout the race where we could have made up that difference. That's what makes cross country such a great team sport. Every position matters, and every guy has an opportunity to make an impact."

With the regional championship approaching, Campbell remains confident in his team's ability to respond and compete for a berth at the IHSAA State Finals.

"One thing I really like about this team is our depth. A lot of teams are trying to find consistency at that fifth scoring position, and we have seven guys who are capable of making a difference. That's a tremendous advantage when we're all clicking. We just need to be a little more aggressive, trust ourselves, and compete the way we know we can."

"At the end of the day, our season isn't over. We have another opportunity next Saturday, and now we have absolutely nothing to lose. This group has worked incredibly hard, and I believe in every single one of these guys. They've accomplished a lot together, and I don't want one race to take away from that. The exciting part is that our best team performance could still be ahead of us. Let's see if we can put one more big race together and earn ourselves a trip to Terre Haute."

The Tigers will return to Manchester next Saturday for the IHSAA Regional Championship, with a trip to the State Finals in Terre Haute on the line.