Punxsy Cross Country aims for the title at District 9 Championships

The Punxsy boys cross country team will head north to Ridgway on Saturday to compete in the District 9 AA Cross Country Championships, with the varsity race scheduled to begin at 1:15 pm, followed directly by the varsity extra race. A total of seven runners from each school are allowed to compete in the varsity race, with all remaining runners participating in the extra race to conclude the racing schedule for the day.

A total of 5 teams compete in the AA division, which includes Bradford, Clearfield, Karns City, Punxsutawney and Saint Marys. The winning team will advance to the PIAA State Cross Country Championships in Hershey on November 5th, along with the top five individuals who are not members of the winning team. Punxsy placed third overall last seasonal behind Bradford and Clearfield, but did qualify two runners for states as Ethan Brentham and Jake Dinger both claimed berths in Hershey.

“I expect us to be much more competitive this year, and there is no doubt we can win if the guys all perform up to their capabilities,” said head coach George Wehrle. “It won’t be easy to overcome Bradford but we are optimistic of our chances.”

Bradford is led by two-time defending district champion Logan Caruso. The Bradford junior had back surgery over the summer but has since rounded in good form over the last few weeks. “I’m sure Caruso would like to defend his title and have a shot at winning all four years, but I think our top two guys, Owen Bartlebaugh and Ethan Brentham, will make things difficult for him on Saturday,” said Wehrle. “It appears as if all three of those runners, along with Vinnie Bizzarro of Bradford, have the most realistic shot at winning.”

Seniors Jake Dinger and Alex Eberhart will factor significantly in Punxsy’s chances to come home with a team title as well. “Jake has proven he can get the job done in Ridgway as last year he had the race of his life at districts,” said Wehrle. “I look for him to be just off the lead pack and hopefully come through with a top five finish. Alex is really coming on and wants to end his career with another trip to states, so I look for him to be highly motivated and aiming for the top 10.”

Ethan May, Liam Storms and Corbin Heitzenrater will round out the varsity squad for Saturdays 3.1 mile race. “Ethan, Liam and Corbin will play huge roles and we really need all of them to pack up somewhere near the top 15,” said Wehrle. “Getting one or two of them ahead of Bradford’s fifth man would be huge for our chances, and I would expect all of them to displace Clearfield’s fifth man to help inflate the Bison score as well.”

While not considered a strong favorite, Clearfield should also be a contender in the team competiton. “Clearfield has a nice group of runners but they don’t have guys up near the front quite like Punxsy and Bradford have, so it will be a bit tougher for them,” said Wehrle. “We only raced against them once all season and came out on top fairly comfortably, but you don’t want to underestimate anyone in a “win or go home” situation like at districts.”

Depending on the team outcome, the state qualifying places for the top five individuals will likely be distributed among three teams, with runners from Punxsy, Bradford and Clearfield the only probable contenders heading into Saturday. “You never know for sure, but Saint Marys and Karns City don’t have anyone poised to challenge for a state berth,” said Wehrle. “I think Caruso, Bizzarro, and Cade Hayden from Bradford, Bartlebaugh, Brentham and Dinger from Punxsy, along with Jeremiah Vezza and Isaac Swanson from Clearfield are the most likely guys to claim the ticket to states should their respective teams not qualify. Kyle Biancuzzo from Clearfield is a bit of a wild card as he also participates in soccer during the fall and has competed sparingly in cross country this season. However, he is the defending district 3200 meter champion from last spring and could be a factor, assuming he runs.”

Competing in the varsity extra race will be Evan States, Kevin Ingros, Samuel Rodgers, Jacob Good, Luke Poole and Copeland Whitfield. “I’ve always said the varsity extra guys have it tougher than the varsity runners because their race doesn’t have quite the attention and drama as the varsity races, said Wehrle. “However, these six guys are expected to compete with the same level of pride and intensity as the seven varsity runners and come away with a performance worthy of all the time and effort they have put in this season.”