Punxsy Boys Cross Country places 2nd at districts; Bartlebaugh, Heitzenrater advance to State Meet

 The Punxsy boys cross country team didn’t go down without a fight against a strong Bradford Owls contingent on Saturday at the District 9 Cross Country Championships, ultimately falling in defense of their team title by the score of 34-44, with Clearfield close behind in third with 49 points. “The better team won, without a doubt, but our guys certainly made Bradford earn it,” said coach George Wehrle. “We matched up well against them through four runners, but they were stronger from that point on and that was the difference today.”

 Bradford will advance their top seven runners to the PIAA state meet next Saturday in Hershey, but Punxsy didn’t go home from Ridgway empty-handed as sophomores Owen Bartlebaugh and Corbin Heitzenrater both advanced to the championship meet as individuals, along with Clearfield’s Harrison McMillen, Isaac Swanson and Jeremiah Vezza. “Owen and Corbin were virtual locks in my mind to make it through, and now they will get the privilege of lining up next weekend against some of the best runners in the state.”

 Bradford’s Logan Caruso headed to the front of the 33 runner field right from the opening gun and was never seriously challenged as he completed the 3.1 mile course in 17:07, 28 seconds ahead of Bartlebaugh. “Caruso is an outstanding runner who has rebounded nicely from some significant injury issues, picking up the third district title of his career today,” said Wehrle. “Quite a few runners have won two titles, but Clearfield’s Matt Vezza from 1987-89 was the only other runner to win three titles until Caruso accomplished the feat today.”

 Bartlebaugh picked up his second consecutive runner-up finish as last season he placed just 13 seconds behind his teammate Ethan Brentham. “Owen has already accomplished quite a bit in just his sophomore season, and other than possibly finishing a little closer to Caruso he did just about everything he could do out there,” said Wehrle. “I think Owen will come back with an even better performance at states next week.”

 Bradford’s Tyler Kraft placed third overall in 17:44, with Heitzenrater coming home fourth in 17:57. “Corbin beat out two of the guys who finished ahead of him at the Ridgway Invitational three weeks ago, and he closed the gap on Kraft significantly,” said Wehrle. “Corbin took his running to a new level this season, as last year he placed 11th in 18:59. We need more runners to emulate his approach to training and racing in order to be successful.”

 Clearfield’s trio of McMillen, Swanson and Vezza (son of three-time district champ Matt) claimed the next three places, running in a tight pack virtually the entire race and finishing within two seconds of one another. Vinnie Bizzarro was Bradford’s third runner across the line as he placed eighth in 18:18, just six seconds ahead of Punxsy’s third runner Aiden McLaughlin. “Aiden had a terrific freshman season, finishing just eight seconds away from a qualifying berth,” said Wehrle. “He has a chance to be quite a runner as he continues to mature.”

 Bradford’s fourth runner, Gabe Mitchell, finished 10th overall, just two seconds ahead of Ethan May in 11th with a time of 18:35. “Ethan ran 34 seconds faster than he did here three weeks ago, beating three of the Bradford guys who beat him at the invitational,” said Wehrle. “Last year at districts Ethan only ran 20:09 to place 20th, so he has clearly worked hard to improve.”

 Bradford captured the title by claiming the next three places, with Clearfield getting their fourth and fifth runners in next to complete their scoring. Saint Marys freshman Taylor Biel placed 17th overall in 19:37, followed by Kevin Ingros one place later in 19:44. “Kevin ran 20:57 on this course on October 7th, so he did an outstanding job today,” said Wehrle. “Without his finish we would have been bumped down to third behind Clearfield.”

 Sam Rodgers placed 25th overall with a time of 20:21, with Evan States following two places later in 21:06. “Sam was comparable in time to his previous effort here this season but improved by almost two minutes over his time at districts as a freshman,” said Wehrle. “Evan was a bit slower but similar to where he placed against the other AA runners at the Ridgway Invitational and was also faster than he ran last year in this meet. Looking at our varsity guys as a whole, they were consistent and dependable today. The form chart going into the meet pretty much held true right down the line.”

 Punxsy’s lone senior Ty Knarr ran a seasonal best time of 19:54 to place fifth overall and fourth among the AA runners. “Ty had a tough job, running the last race of the day when course conditions were their worst,” said Wehrle. “He come through with his best race of the year and would have placed 21st in the varsity competition.”

 Despite coming up short as a team, Punxsy still enjoyed a successful season. They finished 13-3 in dual meets and won their own invitational two weeks ago. “I want to thank all our parents for supporting the team this season and helping the kids be able to perform their best,” said Wehrle. “The guys did about as well as they were capable of today, and I’m looking forward to seeing how Owen and Corbin handle the state meet experience again after having competed there last season as freshman.”