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TRINITY - In most high school sports, running is used for a punishment. Too many penalties in a football game, run laps. Too many missed defensive assignments in basketball, run lines. Late for practice in any sport, time to run.

But there are a couple of sports where running is the sport and Wheatmore's Zach Hazelwood does it better than anyone in Randolph County. The Wheatmore High School senior captured the championship of the Piedmont Athletic Conference Cross Country Championship Meet Wednesday, finishing a very grueling course at WHS in a record-time of 18 minutes and 14 seconds, easily beating Uwharrie Charter's Chris White, who finished second in 19:27.



Photo provided.

For Hazelwood, a four-year runner at WHS, he was able to regain the individual title he won as a sophomore but couldn't defend as a junior because of injury.

"He has worked hard since he began and he continues working hard," WHS cross country coach Will Benner said of Hazelwood, who has chopped a minute and half off his time every year of high school.. "He's training in the off season and he doesn't stop. He does quite a few 5 Ks in the off season and even last year, he ran in a Christmas event in an elf costume."

It didn't take long for Hazelwood, whose father runs long distances, to fall in love with the sport. He said he went to practice with his sister as a 14-year-old and realized he could experience success.

"I really didn't have anything better to do," Hazelwood said of why he went with his sister to workouts. "I fell in

love with it. It was something easy for me to do and when I started winning races, it kind of stuck with me."

Over the years, winning cross country races, as it does in all sports, breeds confidence.

"I definitely go into races with a different mindset," Hazelwood said of races as an upperclassman compared to when he started as a freshman. "I am more confident now that I can actually do it compared to when I was a freshman."

It has taken time for Hazelwood to reach the level he is currently at in cross country.

"Most of what he's done and where he is now is because of hard work and training and building his endurance," Benner said. "He has worked hard to build his speed at the end of races. He used to not be a sprinter."

Excelling in cross country isn't easy. Hazelwood has a weekly schedule in the summer he keeps, including running, dietary needs and weight training.

His regimen includes a 10-to-12-mile run on Sunday, an easy jog on Monday, a track workout on Tuesday, an easy day on Wednesday, a longer workout on Thursday and easy days on Friday and Saturday.

It paid off as Hazelwood rolled to the PAC title, despite a difficult course. There is more than 200 feet of elevation gain on the WHS course, more than four times that of most courses.

"It runs two minutes slower just because of the hills," said Hazelwood, who plans to run cross country and track next year at Campbell University.

"It is the only course in the conference that goes completely through the woods. So that definitely can be a challenge with the tree roots and other stuff that can be on the ground."

The cross country regional tournament will be held next Saturday at Fisher River Park in Dobson. The state meet is the following weekend. Hazelwood finished 71st in the state out of 136 runners as a sophomore and 29th out of 136 runners as a junior.

"He certainly can be in the top 20 this year," Benner said. *Photo provided.*



Finishing third at the PAC Meet was Kelton Shoptaw of Providence Grove (19:53), while Randleman's Freddie Mercado was fourth (20:06) and RHS' Jedidiah Dake was fifth in 20:07. PG captured the team title with an outstanding 36 points, having five runners finish in the top 10. The Patriots were followed by Randleman (63), UCA (68), WHS (106), Southwestern Randolph (116) and Trinity (151).

In the girls meet, PG's Laurel Bernhardt placed first in 22:07. She was followed by UCA's Jazmin Palma in 22:39 and PG's Caroline Duvall in 24:33.

PG won the team title in a very close race with UCA. The Pats finished with 41 points and the Eagles 43. Randleman was third with 57 points and Wheatmore fourth with 77.