

Youthful Providence girls hitting stride

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Since the season began, Providence High girls cross-country coach Kurt Niedenzu knew he had a good team.

At the Sun Valley Invitational last Saturday, Niedenzu wanted to see just how good. So he divided his team into three units.

Sun Valley featured many of the Charlotte-area's best teams. And in the toughest division, the championship, the Panthers' "A" team finished first.

Senior co-captain Erin White and 14-year-old sophomore Megan Bynum finish in the top 10 in the championship race.

And Bynum was five days removed from walking on crutches. She'd injured her knee in a soccer match. "It had swollen up to the size of a football," Niedenzu said.

Providence's "B" team finished third in Sun Valley's open division. Yet another Panthers team finished third in the junior varsity division.

"We're really deep," Niedenzu says.

He thinks the team's deep enough to make a run at the school's third state championship. Providence won the title in '93 and has won two regional titles. It has won four consecutive Southwestern 4A titles and been regional runner-up the past two years.

"I truly believe we are better right now than when we won in '93," Niedenzu said, "but the trouble is, the other teams are better too."

Providence's girls will get a



BRIAN TUCKER/Staff

Panthers' running stars: Megan Bynum (left to right) Britt Ellis, Erin White and Chrissy Zemak will lead Providence's girls cross-country team into today's Wendy's Invitational.

HIGH SCHOOL CROSS-COUNTRY

look at the state's top teams today at The Wendy's Invitational at McAlpine Park. Eight races in eight divisions begin at 9 a.m. More than 1,900 runners on 83 teams are entered. Defending boys champion Dobbins Bennett (Tenn.) is back. There are teams

representing the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, New York, Tennessee and Virginia.

Niedenzu and Providence, though, are most concerned with the N.C. entrants, especially the teams he feels his team will need to beat to win the N.C. 4A championship.

Also entered are defending girls 4A champion West Forsyth, perennial power Chapel Hill and Watauga, which had three run-

ners in the top seven at last year's state championships. All return.

Providence "has got a solid girls team," said Larry McAfee, meet co-director and head coach at East Mecklenburg.

"They don't have a real standout in the group, but they have got as much depth as anybody in the state."

Niedenzu says 27 of his 35 runners run times under 25 minutes. By the Nov. 11 state championships, Niedenzu said he's confident he'll have seven runners under 20.

Providence is also young.

White is a senior but the No. 2 runner, and Bynum is a sophomore. The No. 3 runner is freshman Britt Ellis, who hurries over from classes at South Charlotte Middle School to practice with the Panthers.

Niedenzu said that his top runners are running times within 1½ minutes of each other.

Boys

A year ago as a sophomore, East Mecklenburg's Shane Walts didn't qualify for the N.C. 4A finals. That probably will change this year.

"I think he'll be a factor," said McAfee. "I'd say, right now, individually, he's one of the top half-dozen in the state."

Walts has been steadily getting better and faster as the season has progressed. He finished fifth in the Wilmington Invitational, fourth in the Wake Forest Invitational, both big meets.

Last Saturday, Walts ran a time of 16 minutes 41.9 seconds and finished first at Sun Valley.