

Lowman runs to regional cross country championship

BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

SALEM — Kiera Lowman had crossed the finish line minutes earlier.

She was handing out water to her own teammates and runners from all the other schools as they collapsed shortly after arriving in the chute.

Minutes later, an Alleghany teammate arrived with Reggie.

In less than 30 minutes, all sides of the Mountaineer freshman phenom were on display — lightning-fast runner, fierce competitor, great teammate, extraordinary sportsman, and equally as important, a typical 14-year-old girl clutching her stuffed dinosaur.

“A few years ago, I bought this,” Lowman said, pointing to Reggie. “I think I bought it after a cross country race. I started bringing him to all my track and cross country races. The team, we love my stuffed animal. I got him a jersey. He is reppin’ Alleghany.”

And by the way, Lowman had just added another title to her fast-growing resume — Class 2, Region C champion.

She blew away the 56-runner field last Wednesday at Green Hill Park in Salem, turning in a personal-best time of 18:32 on the way to her sixth win in seven races this season.

The top-ranked Class 2 runner in the state, her philosophy is simple and spot-on in handling the role as a heavy, heavy favorite in nearly every race in which she competes.

“You know, I always try to think like, you never know what can happen,” Lowman said, with Reggie in tow. “There’s always going to be someone better than you out there. There’s always people who are faster than you. You just can’t worry about the rankings and everything and just go out there and run your race. The rankings, they don’t mean anything. You just have to go out there and run your race.”

She ran her race nearly a minute and a half faster than runner-up Clara Moldenhauer of Nelson County, and will enter Saturday’s state championship, back at Green Hill, with a target on her back.

“It puts a little pressure on her, but she does well with pressure,” said Alleghany coach Jeremy Bartley. “She doesn’t put pressure on herself. Kiera just wants to have fun and run fast. She has fun running fast. She doesn’t worry about what other people are doing; she worries about what she’s doing. Everyone’s focused on her; she’s focused on her.”

Joining Lowman on the all-region team were Mountaineer teammates Gracie Barron, who finished sixth with a time of 20:17, and Macyn Cash with a seventh-place time of 20:19.

Alleghany finished as the team runner-up, seven points back of Floyd County.

The Buffaloes are the top-ranked team in Class 2, while the Mountaineers are second entering Saturday's state race.

"It was very close today," Bartley said. "Next week, we are going to have more people between Kiera and everybody else, so that adds points to them and not really us. Floyd's No. 5 runner beat our four. Our four and five have to get up there and mix it up. We have three girls recovering from illness right now and that hurts. They're going to recover this week and we are going to get after it, and we are going to do our best next week."

On the boys' side, the Mountaineers placed fifth as a team, missing a top-three finish and state berth by just 19 points.

Kellen Lowman led Alleghany by finishing 15th with a PR time of 17:39.

Maddox Wickline (25th, 18:24), Brennon Mahon (26th, 18:35) and Josh Anglin (28th, 18:43) all placed in the top 30.

"Our boys did well," Bartley said. "Kellen ran a great race and the guys packed up well."

The Floyd County boys, like the girls, were the regional champs, led by individual winner Mason Erchull, who posted a time of 16:15.

The Mountaineer girls will be on the course at 11:45 a.m. Saturday morning gunning at a state championship. Reggie will be along for the ride.

'I just wanted to play so badly': Cougar athlete pushes through

BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

COVINGTON — Day one of volleyball practice went pretty much as planned back in August of 2019 for 15-year-old Aubrey Brown.

Brown was a freshman trying to make a good impression on her coach — Mary Tyree — and her older Covington High School teammates.

She was one of the first at the end of practice to start the routine everyday procedure of taking down the net.

In a split second, something routine turned into a horrific accident.

"I was a little impatient," Aubrey said, prior to a preseason practice last week. "I was trying to get the net down. We had our old net. I jumped up to take the pin out and the little, I guess the

metal thing that's coated in plastic, it didn't have the plastic on it. It (my thumb) got caught and took the skin back."

In medical terms it was what's called a degloving injury. The layers of skin and tissue tore away from the bone in Aubrey's right thumb.

"It was pretty rough, I didn't feel it until I looked at it," said Brown. "And then the air hit my bone and it was like, oh, my gosh!"

Brown had emergency surgery that night and two weeks later a skin graft was taken from her arm.

"It was the most horrible experience I think I've ever been through," said Tyree. "But she, as a young lady, taught me a lot of things during that time. I know she had her ups and downs, but I know when she was around me, she was the positive one. I was the one who was sad, worried, upset. She was the one keeping me up.

"I have this picture that Gavin (Dressler) took," the coach added. "It's the best picture that represents sports and it represents Aubrey. I always say a quiet bench is a losing bench. There's a picture of her and several of her teammates cheering on the girls on the floor. She's got a block cast on but she's right there with the team doing her part."

Brown played just four matches as a freshman, coming back exactly two months from her accident.

"The first couple months, it was scary going back into it," she said. "But after that, I just wanted to play so bad that I didn't really care. I wrapped it up for months and months and then it was like, OK, I'm tired of doing this. It took so much time. I just stopped."

Three years later, Aubrey is gearing up for her senior season as a Covington Cougar.

Aubrey is still not at 100 percent. She said doctors told her it would be 10 years until she is fully recovered.

Don't tell that to her opponents across the net.

Last fall, Aubrey won Player of the Year honors in the Pioneer District, knocking down 209 kills, serving 86 aces and adding 189 assists and 153 digs.

She has committed to play volleyball next year at Roanoke College. "Pretty excited about that," said Brown. "I love Coach Blair (Trail), she's really sweet. And I love the girls. I worked their camp this past year and it was really fun. They were good to be around and the school is so nice."

It hasn't been easy for any high school student-athlete over the past couple of years, especially for Brown.

After the accident as a freshman, her sophomore season ended abruptly due to the pandemic and even last season, the Cougar program had a shut down early in the preseason.

But pressing on, Brown has continued her recovery, playing year-round travel ball for the Next Revolution program, based out of Roanoke.

This past year, Aubrey has played in tournaments in Orlando, Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

“She is the most dedicated volleyball athlete that I’ve probably ever had,” said Tyree.

Aubrey knows that dedication goes beyond herself.

“My parents have sacrificed a lot for me,” she said of her mom and dad, Joyce and Lee Brown.

“I feel like the thing I thank them the most for is just being there to support me mentally,” she added. “Having different coaches and playing with other girls from different schools can be really tough on your state of mind. My parents do a really good job of knowing when I’m down and they do a good job of picking me back up. It’s great to have that.”

In Cougar practice, there is a little something that’s changed over the past four years.

You won’t see Aubrey Brown, or any Cougar for that matter, doing much work breaking down the net after practice.

“No,” Tyree said emphatically. “We have a totally different system now. But I do the majority of the work. I don’t let the kids do anything. I just can’t. I just can’t.”

And if Aubrey even gets near the process, she’s sure to get an earful from her coach.

“I’m up against the bleachers and I can never go near it,” Brown said with a smile. “If I do, it’s like, ‘Sit your butt down.’”

The Cougars are preparing for Monday’s season opener at James River. Aubrey said she and her teammates have turned it up in practice.

“We lost a lot of talent (from last year), but I feel like the talent has stepped back up,” she said. “We’re working on the chemistry now of our team. I feel like we are going to be just as good if not better than last year. The work ethic that I’ve seen is just insane. I’ve never seen it like this. We have our goals. We always get stuck at that first region game. That’s our goal to just push through that this year.”

Miller wins regional, five Mountaineers qualify for state tourney

BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

RADFORD — When Dontae Miller was asked to join the Clifton Middle School wrestling team as a seventh grader, he had no way of knowing.

He didn't know how he would grow to love the sport.

He didn't know how wrestling would change his life.

And he certainly didn't know that four years later, on a February Saturday evening at Radford High School, he would be standing proudly on top of a regional victory podium.

Miller's championship in the 138-pound weight class highlighted a big day for the Alleghany Mountaineers at the Class 2, Region C wrestling championships on Saturday.

Lucas Rogers (170 pounds), Ryan Shue (220) and Nathan Clark (285) all placed second in their weight classes and Ivan Dobbs finished third at 160 pounds, completing a group of five Alleghany wrestlers who punched their tickets to the state tournament at the Salem Civic Center next Friday and Saturday, Feb. 18-19.

The Mountaineers finished third as a team behind Three Rivers District rivals Glenvar and James River.

“Definitely pleased, to get five to the next level is nice,” said AHS coach Dale Burdette. “There were some other guys who were really close. The guys who qualified definitely earned it today. After missing a year (due to COVID) and then a third of our season this year — those matches are invaluable when you get to this level experience wise. I'm pretty proud of all those guys who came here and fought today.”

The strategy was a simple one for Miller in his championship 10-4 decision over Dan River's Bryan Rito-Villar.

“I've got to score first,” he said, shortly after his hand was lifted as a regional champion. “You've got to be aggressive all the time and score and score and score.”

Five seconds after the opening whistle, Miller had a takedown.

The junior added another takedown and a reversal for a 6-3 lead after a period, kept his opponent on the mat for the entire two-minute second period, and finished him off with a reversal and take down in the third.

“This is the first year I've really been committed to the sport,” said Miller, who is now 33-7 this season. “I've seen the years fly by and this has really been my only option to do something I really love in life. It really got me out of a lot of trouble. In seventh grade, somebody asked me to come out. It changed my life.”

The Miller story is one of many over the years that Burdette and his Alleghany wrestling program can be proud of.

“Dontae has come so far since we first saw him in middle school,” Burdette reflected. “He went from a guy who was getting in trouble in school ... he found something that he enjoyed, and he liked. He learned some discipline through wrestling and that discipline carried over into the classroom and into the rest of his life. Pretty awesome to see the transformation in that young man.”

Three other Mountaineers fell one match short of a title, but used their second-place finish to get to Salem.

Rogers (27-5) lost a 19-5 decision to Chase Miller of Glenvar, Shue (25-10) was pinned in the second period by Charlie Davis of Radford, and Clark (31-7) lost a 5-2 decision to C.J. Jones of Appomattox in what was a one-point match in the final seconds.

“Nathan came out last year and we didn’t get to have a season,” Burdette said. “He could have really benefited from having those matches last year. But he wrestled the same guy today in the regional final that he did in the first match he ever wrestled back at Parry McCluer. He went from getting pinned in the first period to going to the final seconds. Shue had a close match-up, but that guy was really good at rolling. He caught Ryan in a roll. Ryan has been very coachable all year and has done everything we’ve asked him to do. That goes a long way in him having the success he’s had. Lucas has been out sick until Tuesday. He was trying to get his lungs back. He beat a returning state qualifier from Dan River and then had to beat a guy who finished above him at our sub-regions. He really took it to him.”

For Dobbs it was a trip through the wrestlebacks that got him his state berth.

After a semifinal loss, Dobbs pinned Will Anderson (Chatham) in the second period before posting a 13-5 major decision over Emery Chaffin (Floyd County) in a third place bout.

“It’s one thing wrestling in the finals, you know you are in the state tournament,” Burdette said of Dobbs’ effort. “But to come back through the blood rounds, that says a lot. They are called the blood rounds for a reason. A lot of pressure in those matches.”

Ethan Nicely just missed a state berth, losing in overtime to James Farris (Martinsville) in a third-place match, while Matt Howell and Remington Tucker both placed fifth in their weight classes.

The Class 2 state tournament will feature 12-person brackets with matches beginning at 10 a.m. on Friday, Feb. 18. The Civic Center will also host the Class 1 and Class 3 events at the same time.

It will be Rogers’ second trip to Salem after wrestling in the state as a sophomore, while Miller, Shue, Clark and Dobbs will be on the big stage for the first time.

“Awesome to get back to Salem,” said Burdette. “Had to watch it on the NFHS network last year and that’s not what you want to do. It’s the Super Bowl of our sport. And it’s neat that it’s right in our back yard. People can come see, friends and family are close by and can come watch it. It’s a really cool event.”