

Winner surprises herself to lead Gunn girls' victory

By Paul Salvoni
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Gunn High School's Laura Burtness and Wilcox's Becki Van Zant enjoyed a new experience Thursday — finishing ahead of the pack, instead of in the middle of it.

Burtness and Van Zant were as surprised as they were elated after placing one-two in the varsity girls' cross country race in a center meet at Belmont's 2.9-mile Crystal Springs course.

Burtness' victory helped Gunn's girls capture the team title with 73 points. Palo Alto (80) and Menlo-Atherton (83) finished second and third.

Mills' Chris Becerra came from behind to win the boys' varsity race, while Bellarmine, led by third-place finisher Shawn Ayers, took the team title with 45 points, followed by M-A (88), Carlmont (112) and Mountain View (144).

"In the past, there's always been about 500 people ahead of me," Van Zant said. "It was strange ... Toward the end, I thought, 'Where are all the people?'"

"I was really surprised," Burtness said. "My coach (Hal Daner) had said I might finish among the top five if I had a really good day. I didn't expect this."

The meet was the first of three center meets on three successive Thursdays at Crystal Springs.

Central Coast Section schools Mountain View and Silver Creek did not compete in the girls' race Thursday — which meant Mountain View's Shannon Clark and Silver Creek's Nanette Garcia, two of the section's premier runners, did not run. Even so, placing one-two was a satisfying experience for seniors Burtness and Van Zant, close friends who last year were overshadowed by teammates Ruth Hamerton-Kelly and Anne Kendrick, respectively.

"It's tougher (with Kendrick gone) because I'm never sure if I'm practicing hard enough," said Van Zant, 15th in the CCS last year.

Burtness was fifth with 1½ miles to go, but passed three runners to move into second. She then passed Van Zant with about 250 yards to go and finished in 19:38, nine seconds ahead of Van Zant.

"She's worked hard, and she deserves all the credit she can get,"

Prep cross country

● Prep scoreboard — C-5

Daner said of Burtness. "She's put in her time."

Daner also was pleased with sophomore Jenny Pickering, a transfer from Seattle. Pickering was Gunn's No. 2 finisher, completing the course in 20:53 for seventh.

The top three teams in next month's CCS finals will advance to the Northern California meet, and Gunn's girls will be trying to earn a NorCal team berth for the fifth consecutive year.

Bellarmine's Ayers was the leader during most of the boys' race, despite a cold. But Mills' Becerra passed him on an uphill climb with 500 yards to go and finished strong, while Ayers faded and settled for third behind Mountain View's Craig Blockhus, who finished 15 seconds behind Becerra.

A senior, Becerra has been training on hills with former Mills stand-out Dave Marson.

"I thought I'd try to get him (Ayers) on the hills," Becerra said. "I've been doing a lot of running on steep hills in Hillsborough, and it's helping. Most people don't like this course (because of its hills)."

Ayers and M-A sophomore Aaron Lopez, who finished three-four, were among four runners clocked in 16:04.

"It was the first time I'd run on this course this season, so I was pretty happy with my time," Lopez said.

Belmont's Crystal Springs course also will be the site for the ninth annual Crystal Springs Invitational meet Saturday at 9 a.m. Runners from numerous Peninsula schools who did not run in Thursday's meet will run Saturday.

Last year's Stanford Invitational meet was believed to include more high school runners than any meet in Bay Area history, and the meet scheduled Monday on Stanford's 5,000-meter course is expected to attract a similar number of competitors.