

Metro teams catching up



DAN DEAR/staff photographer

Eric Kowal of Walled Lake Central competes in the giant slalom Monday during the state ski championships at Crystal Mountain. Kowal

placed 48th. The Vikings finished ninth in the team standings.

Vikings finish 9th in state finals

By Bill Parker
Staff writer

There was joy and disappointment from area skiers at the state Alpine ski championships Monday at Crystal Mountain in Thompsonville.

On the happy side, Bloomfield Hills Andover placed third in the boys race, Birmingham Marian took fourth in the girls event and Birmingham Brother Rice's Kevin Cook and Birmingham Seaholm's Timber Moreland finished among the top three in individual competition.

On the disappointing side was a ninth-place finish in the team standings by the Walled Lake Central boys, and falls which led to the disqualification of Walled Lake Western's Kristen Anthony, Farmington Hills Mercy's Nicole Sinclair and Rochester's Scott Van Horne. (Sinclair DQed on the slalom but placed 37th in the giant slalom.)

Andover placed third with 151½ points. Traverse City won the boys title for the third year in a row with 64½ points while Petoskey placed second with 79.

At the end of the meet Andover was listed fourth in the standings, but after meet officials rechecked the final results an error was found,

skiing

moving the Barons into third.

"THE WHOLE team skied well right down to the roughest kid," Andover coach Al Cuthrell said. "This is the second year in a row the Andover boys have made it to state and this team has performed better than any other." (Last year the Barons finished eighth.) "I've had most of these kids for four years and they really wanted it."

Senior Derek Strafor paced the Barons, placing second in the team competition in the GS (42.53) and 25th in the slalom (56.62) after sliding into a gate.

Marian surprised many, including its coach, Rob Rhodes, with fourth place in the girls standings with 151 points. Cadillac won the meet with 78 points followed by Traverse City with 91 and Charlevoix with 134.

"We had some good luck with us today," said Rhodes, in his rookie season as head coach at Marian. "I was kind of surprised. It's a great finish. I couldn't ask for more out of

a group of sophomores and freshmen."

"When we came up here our goal was to ski our best and I think everyone did that. It's been a fun weekend and a good experience."

Sophomore Julie Bird led the Mustangs, as she has all season. Bird finished fifth in the team competition in the slalom (55.37) and 11th in the GS (46.57). Sophomore Tracy Sinclair finished 11th in the slalom (58.20) and 15th in the GS (47.53). Junior Jenny Bailey placed 29th in the slalom (64.61) and 40th in the GS (56.73). Sophomore Natalie Burge placed 18th in the slalom (61.03) and freshman Kelly Cook placed 22nd in the GS (48.33).

WALLED LAKE Central finished ninth in the team standings with 291½ points.

"Ninth in the state really isn't that bad," said Central coach Jim Adams. "We had a lot of kids fall today, which you try to avoid when you come up here."

"We only had four guys finish the slalom and two of them fell. In the GS, we had another guy fall. I think a lot of it had to do with nerves, and a lot had to do with the steepness of the hill."



outdoors

Bill Parker

"THEY (NORTHERN TEAMS) can't let up," said Andover coach Al Cuthrell. "We're creeping in. More and more kids from the area are going up north to ski on weekends and are going to race camps. The level of competition (in southern Michigan) is getting better."

Marian coach Rob Rhodes, who turned a team of underclassmen into state contenders this year, feels his team may be the one to break the ice for the southern teams.

"We're like the Red Wings. This year it's, 'Just a Matter of Time, next year it will be, 'We're for Real,'" said Rhodes, referring to the popular Red Wings video tapes. "In two years they better watch out because we will have a team. I think we turned a few heads today."

NORTHERN TEAMS have three distinct advantages over the southern teams: first, they have the edge in experience; second, they have the advantage of a full season; third, they have the home-court (hill) advantage.

The meet has been held up north all 15 years. With the northern teams training on the steeper terrain throughout the season they certainly have an edge when the meet is held on the steep.

But the meet location is only logical. Southern Michigan weather is much too unpredictable to host the meet in late February. It could, and probably would, rain for a week before such a meet.

The main difference is much deeper than the pitch of a hill. The northern teams excel because northern Michigan is ski country. The main differences are the experience and the season.

"YOU CAN SEE the difference," said Cuthrell. "These kids practice on these hills all year. And they have a lot of opportunities. Up here the city recreation department has a junior racing program and the Grand Traverse Ski Club has a race team. The USSA (United States Ski

Association) is very active up here because this is where the skiing is." Redford Catholic Central and Farmington Hills Mercy coach Cass Zarlikowski, who had a couple skiers in the individual competition this year, sees the northern dominance as a difference in lifestyle.

"Most of the kids up here race in the USSA junior program from a young age. A lot of them are members of racing academies," Zarlikowski said. "It's almost like professionals against amateurs. In the south, you have recreational skiers. Up here it's like a job, they ski here every day."

The ski season up north is longer than the ski season in the south, which also benefits the northern teams.

"They start skiing up here in November," Cuthrell said. "If we get one or two weeks of skiing in before Christmas we're darn lucky."

THE DIFFERENCES are there, but the gap is becoming smaller as more and more southern Michigan skiers look for other options to gain a competitive edge.

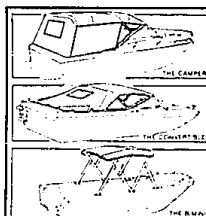
"One thing that has helped our kids considerably is that they are coming up here on weekends more frequently, either to ski or to compete in some of the races," Cuthrell said. "Parents are helping a lot too, by letting their kids go out west to training camps."

This year, the southern teams made some noise at state, but not enough to drown out the cheering of the local supporters.

If this trend continues, if more and more high school students look north for weekend competition, and if we get just a little help from Mother Nature in terms of some November-December snow which would allow our teams to enjoy a full ski season, the tide could soon turn.

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