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History in the making

Women harriers in NCAAs for the first time

By DIANE XAVIER
The Battalion

Texas A&M cross country coach Dave Hartman said he will never forget the first season he trained the young, inexperienced Aggie women's squad in 1998.

"I didn't know what to expect at that time," Hartman said. "I wasn't confident in how we would race and finish with all the fresh new faces I had to work with back then."

The 1998 team has blossomed into one of the strongest teams in the nation by becoming A&M's first women's cross-country team to win the NCAA South Central Regional on Nov. 11 in Denton.

The victory allows the Aggie women's team to compete at the national meet in Ames, Iowa today for the first time in school history.

The women's 6,000-meter race is set for 11 a.m.

"Winning regionals and qualifying for nationals is a tremendous accomplishment for us," Hartman said. "All those years of training have finally paid off for the women's squad."

The victory boosted the women's ranking to No. 16 after upsetting heavily favored Arkansas at the NCAA South Central Regional meet.

Despite the team's recent progression in the polls, Hartman said he believes his team still does not get enough credit.

"We should be ranked higher," he said. "We've beaten teams that are ahead of us in the polls, like 15th-ranked Brown University. I really don't understand the polls."

Despite having its strongest season ever, A&M has received low rankings.

For example, in the A&M invitational that the women won, the team was dropped three spots in the rankings from No. 18 to No. 21. Also, after A&M took fourth at the Big 12 championships in Boulder, Colo., the school's highest finish at a conference meet since 1991, the national poll dropped A&M three spots to No. 24.

Nevertheless, Hartman said his team is not going to worry about where his team stands.

"In this race, anything can happen," Hartman said. "If only one girl falls behind, then that puts our whole team back. There is a lot more pressure to perform well because one little mess-up can cost us the race."



BERNARDO GARZA/The Battalion

Jennifer Whatley and the rest of the women harriers compete in the NCAA Championships today in Ames, Iowa.

The squad is led this year by Melissa Gulli and Andrea Bookout. Gulli was the team's top finisher in the 12 meet, the A&M invitational, and the Iona and the invitational.

Gulli earned her second all-region honors after finishing seventh at the NCAA meet.

"I think people have trouble believing in us," Gulli said. "They won't believe in our team unless we prove ourselves."

Bookout, who placed fourth at regionals, also earned her second consecutive all-region honors.

"We have been proving everyone wrong all year," Bookout said. "And we plan to do that again at nationals. The low rankings we have been receiving all year motivate us to perform better."

NCAA SHOWCASE

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A&M's top performance of the weekend was in the last event of the meet. The men closed out the competition in style by cruising to a victory in the 400-yard freestyle relay with an NCAA automatic qualifying time of 2:55.32. That time will send the relay team, composed of Matt Rose, David Morrow, Riley Janes and Keven Kehlenbach, to the NCAA Championships, which A&M is hosting at the Student Recreation Center Natatorium in March.

Overall, the relays in the invitational belonged to the A&M men. They won four of the five relays and finished second in the 800-yard freestyle relay.

In the four relays in which the men did not reach the automatic time, they still made the NCAA consideration times. That means that all of A&M's relay teams could end up at the NCAA Championships.

"Our strength is definitely our relays," Nash said. "That is our claim to fame ... the last few years, and they are pulling some individual swims out of our guys."

TEAM VICTORY

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particularly had some good swims, and that is exciting for the future."

Bultman listed a number of walk-ons who had good weekends, but the one who had the best meet was Marie Durso who finished in the top eight in several events, including a third-place finish in the 1,650-yard freestyle.

Depth was not the only thing that the A&M women had going for them—Clara Ho, Sharisse Blau and Stephen Steel all had top performances in the meet.

Ho had A&M women's the best performance by winning both the 100-yard butterfly and the 200-yard butterfly. Both of her times in those events barely missed the NCAA consideration times. She also finished in the top eight in three other events.

Blau finished second in the 100-yard backstroke and third in the 50-yard freestyle and finished in the top eight in two other events.

Steel won the 1,650-yard freestyle and finished in the top five of two other events.

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