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TEAM RUNNERGIRL MAKES MOST OF SECOND CHANCE

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Sometimes, a little disappointment can be a huge motivator.

In the case of Team RunnerGirl, disappointment propelled it to top finishes in every division it entered at the recent USA Track and Field Junior Olympics/Open/Masters Cross Country Regional Championships.

"This year, the Junior Olympics was kind of an afterthought," said RunnerGirl head coach Rae Ann Darling Reed, who is also the head girls cross country coach at Manatee High. "We didn't make it to the state meet as a team, so I thought, let's find some way to extend the season a little bit.

"So, the Junior Olympics the following week was a perfect meet to go to."

The 5-kilometer Clermont course was unlike any the team had seen all season. It featured hills, and the entire race was run on grass, a far cry from the sidewalks and roads RunnerGirl is used to seeing while training at G.T. Bray.

Team RunnerGirl had no problem adjusting to the tougher course, as the squad won the Junior Olympics cross country team championship.

In the Young Women Division, Team RunnerGirl swept the top five positions, led by Kelly Wenz, 18, a senior at Manatee High. The rest of the top five were Manatee seniors Lena Traylor and Skylar Melnick, followed by Lakewood Ranch seniors Sayuri Beretta and Shannon Walsh.

"It was difficult," said Wenz, who was among the top runners for Reed's Manatee squad for most of the high school season. "It was a long race, but it was pretty fun."

"It was an interesting race," added Skylar Melnick, 17. "It was nothing like I had run before. It was very surprising when we got there and actually saw hills in Florida."

Team RunnerGirl's Ashley Sharpin, a junior at Manatee, also claimed a victory in the Intermediate Girls Division. Sharpin, 17, is in her first year running cross country with both Manatee and RunnerGirl. Her win was particularly satisfying, considering the adjustment she's had to make from track to cross country.

"It's definitely been a big transition because you do so much longer runs," she said. "One day here, we

might do 10 miles, where in track, it's mostly about speed."

As if coaching the girls in the Junior Olympics wasn't a challenge enough for Reed, she entered the Cross Country Open Division event herself. Taking advantage of a rare chance to race, Reed, 32, who is also a member of the Bradenton Runners Club, came away with the championship.

"There aren't a whole lot of cross country events for adults, so when there is one, I like to take the opportunity," Reed said. "I hadn't run cross country in a while. After I ran this cross country meet, I decided I need to look for more cross country meets for adults because I loved it, and it was just a great experience."

Another team member, Debbie Walsh, placed second in the Cross Country Women's Master Division. Walsh is Shannon Walsh's mother, and she also is a member of the Bradenton Runners Club.

For most members of Team RunnerGirl, this is their final year to compete at this level. Some, like Wenz, are using their experiences to prepare for competition in college. Wenz will be running for St. Leo's in Ocala next year. Melnick and Beretta said they plan on doing some form of running as walk-ons wherever they go.

Until then, the group will remain together through graduation next year.

"This is really fun and motivating," Beretta said. "We do the hard workouts and the long runs, but it's a lot of fun. It helps you meet people, and it's a good experience."

"We're like a big family," Wenz added. "We run together, and no one runs alone."



Team RunnerGirl, from left: Sayuri Beretta, Lena Traylor, Ashley Sharpin, Skylar Melnick, Elizabeth Kelly Wenz and Shannon Walsh.



Rae Ann Darling Reed, right, Cross Country and Track coach at Manatee High, stands with Debbie Walsh, who placed second in the Cross Country Women's Master Division and is Shannon Walsh's mother.

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