

Nordic state skiing: Highland Park's teams deliver a pair of team podium finishes

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St. Paul Highland Park boys pose for a photo with their third place trophy at the State Nordic Championships at Giants Ridge Resort, in Biwabik on Thursday, Feb. 16, 2023. (Craig Lassig / Special to the Pioneer Press)



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Challenges were thrown left and right at Highland Park's Nordic skiing team before and during this week's state meet in Biwabik, Minn.

Forget the conditions, which included 45 mile per hour gusts during the sprint relay portion Wednesday — everyone had to deal with that. The Scots boys team was missing its top skier. The sprint relay teams for the boys and girls crashed in their respective finals Wednesday. A boys skier was ill Thursday ahead of the action.

And none of it deterred the Scots from performing at a high level.

Both Highland Park teams finished third in their team competitions to add two more podium finishes to the program's growing mystique.

Duluth East won both team meets, capping a dominant performance from that program, which also included sweeping the sprint relays.

But the Scots' consistency — the girls entered the meet as winners of two of the past three team titles and runners-up in the season in between — cannot go unnoticed.

"I would say Highland is one of the best ski teams in Minnesota in the past few years," said Scots senior Ben Martin, who placed 20th in the individual competition. "Especially with the girls. The boys are on the rise, though."

Highland, Martin noted, is "just a great ski program." He didn't pick up the sport until he was a freshman and finished his career as one of the top 20 boys in the state. He believes that's a product of how Scots coach Brad Moening runs the program.

Martin highlighted the boys' performance, while the girls were led by Hanna Koch, who finished fifth in the girls overall, while Chloe Koch and Alex Pundsack were 17th and 18th.

Both teams missed out on second place by one point. The boys were edged by Wayzata, while the girls were topped by Stillwater. The Ponies had Lily Ward (sixth), Bailey Holmes (16th) and Annika Fuhrmann (20th) all finish in the top 20.

"We knew going in that there was a lot of strong teams that were in contention for the top three," Chloe Koch said, "and we were super excited to be able to get on the podium."

Martin noted the boys came into the year with state title aspirations. But those took a major hit when Highland Park star skier Davis Isom, who finished second at state a year ago, was tabbed to race for Team USA's U18 team this weekend in Finland.

"We're all very proud of him. ... There was no hard feelings at all, we were so excited for him and excited to watch him (Friday)," Martin said. "After that, it was kind of nice, because there was a lot of pressure lifted off. We were just coming into the race thinking if we could get top five, that'd be a great day. But we got third, so we're pretty excited about that."

Isom's absence forced the Scots to flex their depth. Martin believes a number of Highland Park's junior varsity skiers could compete on varsity squads around the state. The evidence backs up the statement.

"I feel like that says a lot about our program at Highland," he said. "I wouldn't want to be with any other team."

Koch said team environment plays a large role in the program's success.

"I think it's super positive and supportive, and that's a big part of why everyone comes back and also we're able to do so well," she said, "because I think everyone performs better in that environment."

And that environment is conducive to overcoming obstacles that present themselves. Moening was proud of so many things his skiers did this week, from the sprint relay teams that crashed hard but still made a point to finish the race to the performances laid down in Thursday's pursuit. These are the types of efforts that continue to cement a culture of excellence.

"Lots of crashes, lots of tears. Just finally a smiling ending, they just went through a lot and it was just great," Moening said. "I think you feel really good walking away with it. The younger kids got to see an imperfect couple days, and a nice ending."