

Linn-Mar 8th grader stars at regional race

Written by Jim Ecker

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Stephanie Jenks is just 14 years old and an eighth grader at Oak Ridge Middle School in Marion, but she thought it might be fun to race against high school girls at the Heartland Regional Cross Country Championships Sunday in Sioux Falls, S.D.

She did incredibly well.

Jenks finished second in the girls high school division and earned a free trip to the Nike Cross Nationals that will be held in Portland, Ore., on Saturday, Dec. 3.

Jenks ran the 5-kilometer race in 18 minutes, 16.49 seconds - a pace of 5:53 per mile. Maria Hauger, a high school junior from Minnesota, won the race in 17:52.67.

"It was quite a shocker," Jenks said of her performance. "Going into it, my major strategy was to hang with the lead pack as long as I possibly could. I did pretty well."

A total of 221 girls competed in the event, which included runners from six states. There was a sprinkling of other eighth graders, but most of the girls were high school students.

Jenks finished a full minute ahead of Linn-Mar senior Carolyn Newhouse, who finished in 19:16.95 compared to 18:16.49 for Jenks. Newhouse helped Linn-Mar finish second at the Class 4A state cross country meet this month, was the top runner for the Lions most of the season and was selected by coaches at the Metro Athlete of the Year.

Jenks handily defeated other members of the Linn-Mar varsity as well. Next year, Jenks will be a freshman at Linn-Mar High School and undoubtedly will rank as the top runner on the club.

"We didn't know how good she was going to be," said Linn-Mar Coach Todd Goodell, who attended the race. "She proved it today."

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Linn-Mar entered several members of its team in the regional meet, but Jenks ran unattached since she did not compete for the Lions this season.

Jenks is not just an outstanding young runner. She's also one of the top triathletes in her age group in the country and ranks No. 1 in the 13-to-15 youth elite division. She competes in triathlons that feature a 375-yard swim, a 10-kilometer bicycle race and a 2.5-kilometer run.

Jenks said she likes running the best. "Running is my favorite thing to do," she remarked.

She said she's looking forward to competing in the national meet, which is sponsored by Nike. "I'm really excited," she said. "I think it's going to be a lot of fun. I'm really looking forward to it."

Linn-Mar sophomore Josh Evans competed at the regional meet Sunday, but struggled in his race and finished 49th. Evans placed second at the Class 4A state meet last month.