

Sports

Seven Grant County athletes qualify for State

By Sean Douglas

The Marion Track and Field Regional is an event well-known for its draw of the top track and field programs in the state of Indiana.

But over the course of four hours of high-level competition at the Terry Lakes Track and Field Complex, Grant County showed out for the second straight week as seven athletes qualified for the State Finals, which will be held on the campus of Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis.

Tragedy to Triumph

While Oak Hill's night ultimately ended in triumph, it began with a crushing, and questionable, disqualification.

In the first running event of the evening, the 4 x 800 meter relay, the foursome of Owen Jackson, Sol O'Brien, Landon Biegel, and Jacob Winger ran the race of their lives, shattering the Oak Hill school record by nine minutes, while also PRing at two minutes or under.

"I couldn't be prouder," Oak Hill Head Coach Paige Brunner said. "We switched the order up, put Owen first and moved Landon to three to get us in a better spot early. Owen stepped up as a freshman and ran really gutsy. Sol was solid as always, and Landon ran the race of his life [and] dropped six or seven seconds off his normal time. And Jacob ran a great leg."

However, at the conclusion of the race, and with the team celebrating in the twenty yards off the track, it was reported that the group would be disqualified due to Winger dropping the baton before the race was officially over.

While it is a rule, it was one that had not been enforced all year up to that point. Adding to the controversy was the fact that a runner from East Noble, who ended up advancing due to Oak Hill's disqualification, fell out of his lane at the finish line, which could also be grounds for being ousted.

"The ending was horrible," Brunner said. "It rocks you to your core — it's gut wrenching for those guys. As a coach, I don't know what to say. A decision was made on a rule that is a rule, and unfortunately, they have to stand by that. We were hoping that there was some interpretation there that it was not done maliciously. It was not done in a way to put anybody in harm's way, but it is a rule."

Brunner appealed the decision, but the IHSAA offi-



Cubie Jones placed second in the Long Jump, behind teammate Zaimar Burnett. **Photo by Sean Douglas**

cials who took a look at the ruling upheld it.

While the group will not have a chance to run at Ben Davis this coming weekend, Brunner was proud of how they performed.

In his mind, and many others, they are still state qualifiers, even if not in an official capacity.

"It sucks. It's not a great situation," Brunner said. "But I'd rather be in the situation we are in and feel the way we do having run well. That's the consolation. They know they are state qualifiers. They know they were in that spot. They won't get to run next week, unfortunately, but everybody knows it and saw it."

A few hours later, however, senior Mason McKinney gave the Golden Eagles, and their fans, a reason to celebrate.

Racing in the 400 with about 250 meters to go, McKinney looked to be in seventh place as the group neared the final bend.

But coming around the home stretch, McKinney put on the afterburners, making up a plethora of ground on his way to a third-place finish (50.41 seconds)

"That's the way he has been racing all year," Brunner said of McKinney. "We knew he would give himself a shot if he was there. We feel like he's a guy that could have gone to state last year, if we had a season. He has been an absolute rock star for us this year doing everything right and being a great leader."

"For him as a senior

knowing this could be it to be where he was with 200 left and come in [third...], I could not be prouder of a kid."

"Since I was in the second lane, I knew I needed to focus on the third runner and the seventh runner, and base my beginning, 250 pace off of [them,]" McKinney said. "When I got to the 130 mark, I just knew that was where my game was, and that's where I needed to kick it in."

Now, McKinney looked forward to representing Oak Hill at the State Finals.

"That was the goal all season. I trained my butt off for everything," McKinney said. "That's just what I wanted to do this year, and I'm hoping I can make some noise in the state."

Burnett Qualifies Twice;

Jones Too

Marion senior Zaimar



Jacob Winger running the final leg of the 4 x 8 relay. **Photo by Sean Douglas**



Mississinewa's Hayden Nelson finishes second in the 100, while also advancing to the State Finals in the 4 x 1 relay. **Photo by Sean Douglas**

Burnett has put together a solid senior campaign, particularly in the 100 and 200 Meter Dashes.

Turns out, he is a pretty solid field competitor, too.

With a jump of 22 feet, 6 inches, Burnett first punched his ticket to Ben Davis in the long jump, finishing as the regional champion in the event.

"My long jump step used to be far back. I wasn't liking it at first," Burnett said after the event. "So I scooted up a little bit more, and I started getting a better pop."

Burnett will not be the only Marion Giants represented in the event, as teammate Cubie Jones finished in second place with a jump of 21'11.5".

Much like Burnett, Jones has been diligent in his preparation, and execution, throughout the season, and his hard work paid off on Friday.

"I've been working on this since the beginning of the season," Jones said. "This was my goal — to get to state — since my freshman year. Sophomore year, we couldn't do it because of COVID, so this year, it really pumped me up."

"That's a tribute to his coachability and how well he listens and takes instruc-

tion," Marion Head Coach Nate Larson added. "He takes Coach Alsup what gives him and really pushes out what he needs. His athleticism is on par with anything we've got around. He's a great kid, and we love having him."

Jones is also excited to be competing with Burnett, as the two do an excellent job of pushing each other.

"We've been going back and forth," Jones said with a smile. "I've been trying to beat him since forever. It's a great feeling to go there with Zaimar."

Later in the evening, Burnett also qualified in the 200, winning the event in 22.46 seconds.

"It's been a lot of work put into this 200," Burnett said. "I've been, every day, hitting it hard, trying to get better."

Heading back to the State Finals for the second time in his high school career, Burnett is happy to be going back after a fifth place finish in the 200 Meter two years ago.

"It means a lot — to go to State and compete for Marion," Burnett said. "It's a great feeling."

While Larson was proud of how both Burnett and Jones competed throughout the evening, he was also

pleased with the remainder of Marion's athletes in how they performed against an always tough field of competitors.

Indians 4 x 100 team remains undefeated; Nelson advances in 100

Along with Marion and Oak Hill, Mississinewa also put forth a strong showing on Thursday as four athletes qualified for the State Meet.

"They came and competed really well," Mississinewa Head Coach Ean Van Winkle said. "When your 4 x 1 is three sophomores and a junior, and they win it, I can't ask for anything better."

Sophomore Hayden Nelson, who has dominated in the 100 Meter all season long, ran another great race, placing second in the event by .01 seconds (11.01).

"I'm not going to lie, it was pretty intimidating," Nelson said. "I just had to go out there and tell myself I can win this and do what I do."

Now, Nelson is excited to represent Mississinewa in the State Finals.

"It means a lot to me," Nelson said. "It means a lot to my school. I'm just really thankful for all the people supporting me — my dad, coaches, my grandpa up in heaven — I just want to thank those people."

Additionally, Mississinewa's 4 x 100 team of Nelson, Jayden Crick, Peyton McPeak, and Trevon Hess continued their undefeated streak, running another remarkable race to finish as regional champions. The foursome all ran their legs of the race perfectly, clocking in at 43.62.

"They are really fun to watch," Van Winkle said. "I've been coaching for a long time, and relays are my thing. That's what we like doing. We push relays. We practice it every day. We practice handoffs every day. They are ready to go. They never drop the baton. They rarely get out of the zone."