

MINNESOTANS ROBERT MECHURA, NORAH HUSHAGEN WIN NXR HEARTLAND CHAMPIONSHIP RACES

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Robert Merchura edges Manny Putz in the boys championship race.



Norah Hushagen edges Ketelyn Rupe in the girls championship race

Stevens Point Distance Crew Wins Boys Title To Advance To NXN; Wayzata XC Girls First, Boys Second; West Olathe Girls Earn Second Straight Berth

Story and Photos by Doug Binder, DyeStat Editor

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. -- Robert Mechura started preparing for this moment a full year ago, and when he saw an opportunity to win the NXR Heartland boys championship race Sunday, he wasn't willing to let it go.

The junior from the Roseville Running Club (Minnesota) won the Open Section 4 race last year in 15:06.6 -- a time that would have made him eighth in the championship race.

"On this day a year ago, I began to realize I could do some great things," Mechura said.

Results: <https://results.wayzatatiming.com/meets/28769>

Mechura was unbeaten in Minnesota and with two runners ahead of him in the closing stretch, Nebraska champion Juan Gonzalez of Team Fremont and Wisconsin champion Manny Putz of Team Sty-U, he found an extra gear to get around them.

Mechura hit the finish tape one-tenth of a second ahead of Putz, also a junior, in 14:32.0. Gonzalez was third in 14:33.8.

Those three will be joined by fourth-place finisher Sam Scott of Killer Beez (Minnesota) and Clay Shively of Wichita Trinity Running Club (Kansas) as automatic Nike Cross Nationals individual qualifiers.

With mild temperatures into the 60s and a steady breeze, the racing conditions were optimal for fast times on the flat layout at Yankton Trails Park.

The same four teams that qualified at last year's meet will return to Nike Cross Nationals.

Stevens Point Distance Crew took care of business and won the team championship as expected, moving up one spot from last year's Heartland regional. Aloysius Franzen's eighth-place overall finish (third in the team scoring) led the way for the Wisconsin champions.

"It's my last season with my family here, so it's good to see it continue and not end today," Franzen said.

Stevens Point Distance Crew scored 111 points and Wayzata XC Club finished second with 132 points. Those two teams advance automatically to race Dec. 2 at NXN in Portland.

Buffalo Road Track Club of Iowa was third for the second year in a row, this time with 188 points.

In the girls championship race, Minnesota champion Norah Hushagen, another junior, ran 10 seconds faster than 2022 and won the regional race in 17:07.3, a meet record.

Hushagen survived a late challenge from Katelyn Rupe, a Kansas state champion, who was just three-tenths of a second behind in 17:07.6.

"I felt like I wanted to throw up, I felt like I wanted to stop," Hushagen said. "But I've pushed this hard from summer, and this season. I've always thought it would be cool to break the finish tape so I had to find that extra gear."

The Wayzata XC Club girls punched their ticket to nationals for the seventh time, building upon the most enduring running brand name in the region.

Wayzata scored 107 points to earn a return trip with a practically brand new group. Jazleen Malherek-Osorio, new to the varsity lineup this fall, led the team with a 12th-place overall finish. Only Alyson Kleyman and Aubrey Smith, the team's Nos. 2 and 4 runners Sunday, were on last year's team.

Rupe and fifth-place finisher Anjali Hocker-Singh, a four-time Kansas state champion, will represent the state with two individuals for the first time since Molly Born and Emily Venters did it in 2016.

In addition, West Olathe finished second in the team standings with 127 points and the Kansas state champions will make a return trip to Portland. The team's five scorers were separated by 33 seconds, and led by Bree Newport (38th overall in 18:18.4).

Dragoons from Johnston, Iowa were third with 193 points.

Nora Gremban, Wisconsin's Division 2 champion, finished third 17:15.6 and Libby Castelli, who lives just five minutes from Yankton Trails and is a South Dakota champion, was fourth in 17:20.8.