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No near miss for Baginsky Cougar junior earns XC medal

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Danielle Baginsky was shocked by the large number of runners and teams when she showed up to the Manhattan Invitational cross country meet on Saturday.

The Montgomery High School junior was even more shocked when she left Van Cortlandt Park with the final medal from the Varsity A race for finishing 75th out of 249 individuals, in part because she seems to so often just miss out.

"It's always like that," Baginsky said. "Multiple times, I've come up short. And at Holmdel last week, I had a very scary race. I almost passed out at the end. That was a motivating factor. I wanted to come back well. It was a good stepping stone to experience something that big."

There were some big performances from local runners Saturday. Joe Rosa won the Boys Eastern States championship in a new sophomore course record of 12:20.0, almost 10 seconds faster than the previous mark. He led West Windsor-Plainsboro North to fifth in the top race Saturday.

WW-P South's Katie Kellner won the girls' Varsity B race. The Pirates were sixth out of 37 teams. Sam Macaluso was 37th in the Boys Eastern States race to lead the WW-P South boys to 18th out of 30 teams.

Montgomery finished 10th out of the 35 teams in the Varsity A race. Jillian Prentice was third and Lara Shegoski was 17th individually for the Cougars.

Baginsky is not as heralded as fellow juniors Prentice and Shegoski, who were third and 17th respectively in Saturday's race, but she is part of the big three that are leading the Cougars. She has been since they all ran together beginning in sixth grade for the Montgomery Middle School.

"My junior class is the heart of my team," said MHS girls' coach Jim Goodfriend. "Baginsky has done great. She's a three-sport athlete. She's on the basketball team and runs spring track. She's a real good athlete. She's a good kid. I'm happy with her progress. I know she always gives her best."

Baginsky does so despite a knee injury that is a daily battle. She has Patello-Femoral Syndrome, a weakening of the knee joint.

"I've learned to live with the pain," Baginsky said. "I tape my knee before every race. I pull my kneecap over to shift it into place so when I run, it doesn't shift out."

Added Goodfriend: "She's been a really steady contributor. She runs through it. She never complains. She always gives 100 percent. She always practices hard. She's a good total team player. She's one of my co-captains. She knows we need her this year."

Even taping it doesn't take all the pain away. It begs the question, why run?

"I love to run," Baginsky said. "Not only is it a great stress reliever, but I love the people I've been running with. I've been running with Jillian and Lara since sixth grade. We're a close team."

"I think so far the season has gone really well outside of our loss to Hillsborough," she added. "That was a tough way to start the season. We've had a lot of injuries. We've stuck together. Emily Dolen and Laura Key have really stepped it up for us."

So has Baginsky, who knew she would play a bigger factor in the Cougars' success this season as their No. 3 runner after the graduation of Amanda Herrmann and Rachel Holt.

"I definitely felt more of the pressure, not only with Amanda, but with Rachel Holt leaving," Baginsky said. "She was like my mentor. She was the one I ran with every day. I knew in order to be successful as a team, I had to work hard and put that extra work in. I knew I had to step up to make the team better and more successful."

She has helped the Cougars start 4-1 heading into Wednesday's meet against Somerville. MHS could finish its regular season 5-1 before heading to the Brown Invitational on Saturday. Herrmann is a freshman at Brown.

"I think we're running really well," Goodfriend said. "I was happy with the way Jillian started and ran her first three races. I'm

very happy with Shegoski. She's stepped up and she's a really good No. 2. I'm really happy with Baginsky. She's having a good year. When her asthma isn't bothering her, (Nora) Heck is good. Katie Manfredi was hurt last year and she's come back well. I have five kids and they're decent. They seem to be improving. They're having a good time."

The times don't get much better than an unexpected medal for Baginsky on Saturday. In a deep field at a major meet, she came away with the hardware she has deserved.

"I was really honored," Baginsky said. "I was really happy. The first thing I did was call my mom. It was the first meet she wasn't at. I was speechless when they handed it to me. It was an honor for me. I just kept looking at it. I was motivated and would have wanted to place, but I don't think I would have thought I could. It was really a surprise and an honor for me."

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