

Marquette, MI  
2/8/02

A new group of Michigan State High School Champions was crowned this past weekend at the first races held on the ski trails at Al Quaal recreation complex in Ishpeming, MI. The pursuit format started with skating on Saturday and Classic Pursuit on Sunday.

The Boys started first on a sunny Saturday afternoon with temperatures in the high teens. They raced 10K freestyle on the challenging new green trail 5K loop. The race was quite a battle for first place as Mick Tiffany (Traverse City) and John Olson (Copper Country) set the pace early on. Both these boys were top 5 finishers from last year's championships and each clearly wanted to become this year's overall champion. Tiffany, the established favorite after a mid January JOQ skate race where he was clearly the class of the field, started out first and went through the 2.5k split with the race lead. Olson, whom is skiing better technically in classic, came through shortly after Tiffany with a 10 second lead on Tiffany and the rest of the field. However, in the next 5k Tiffany put in a valiant effort and closed the gap to 1 second midway through lap 2. At this point it was anyone's guess as to how the race would end up. The two racers had now established what seemed to be a two horse race that was neck and neck. They were just starting the sustained climb before the S turns into the finish. Each looked to be capable of holding their pace. With Tiffany closing the gap in the split many thought he was going to edge Olson. But, Olson took advantage of starting behind Tiffany and having the benefit of splits and was able to claw the gap back out to 3 seconds at the finish and earn his first podium at the championships.

The definite surprise of Saturday came from the UP running sensation, Jamie Cihak (Marquette). Cihak had to be talked into racing by his schoolmate, Evan Milton, earlier in the week and he made good with a performance that looked effortless and placed him in third, less than 10 seconds off the pace. Rounding out the top 5 were JII new comer Dylan Pera (Ironwood), who will be traveling to his first JOs come march, and Brad Winkler (Boyne).

In the team results, after day one, Traverse City had a 10 point lead for the boys team championship and showed they were the guys to beat. Rounding out the top 3 teams were Marquette and Copper Country.

The girls started off after the boys for 7.5K on the green course. This meant they would only have to ski the climb up to the top of the north shore ridge once, but they would have to deal with the wicked S turns twice. Chase Edwards (Glenn Lake), the defending champion, drew an early number and set a good pace. She would hold the race lead until the last starter, her younger sister Cassidy(GL), came through and showed the form which put her in the top 10 at the JOs last year as a 13 year old. In between the duo of sisters, other challengers, Julia Coulter (TC) and Allison Cregg(MQT), had latched onto each other in a battle for third.

Julia Coulter took things out hard enough to catch her :30 sec. lady, Cregg, and then she held on to the hard finishing Cregg to take third. Cregg stayed in 4th through out the race and Anna Coulter, Julia's twin, nailed down 5th. In the girls team standings Traverse City had a ten point lead on the Marquette and Glenn Lake teams.

Saturdays results left some questions in the minds of racers, fans and coaches. What would happen in the boys pursuit with three racers starting out within 10 seconds? Could Marquette again show its classic prowess on day 2 and pull out a come from behind win for the overall team title for the second straight year, or had Traverse City shown its strength and opened an unclosable gap? The only certainty was that there was little doubt that the Girls field was not likely to see a major shake up on Sunday.

The Girls started out first Sunday morning and saw beautiful conditions in the high 20s on the more mellow blue trail. Cassidy Edwards started out with a lead of about a minute after the FS and easily lead wire to wire, as she turned in the fastest split of the day and widened her lead to a minute and a quarter. The rest of the top 10 ladies field also stayed on form as few gaps were closed, and Traverse City took the Girls team title over Marquette. Individual 2-10 went as follows: Chase Edwards (2 - GL), Julia Coulter (3 - TC), Allison Cregg (4 - MQT), Anna Coulter (5 - TC), Kaye Helminen (6 - CC), Ingrid Fjeldheim (7 - MQT), Michaela Harris (8 - TC), Karen Jarvey (9 - CC), Lissa Ault (10 - TC).

After the Girls, the boys took to the course to put a close to the championships. John Olson would get the honor of starting out the high schoolers, 3 seconds up on Mick Tiffany. Based upon earlier head to head results and Saturdays race, Olson now wore the title of favorite. But, with only a three second lead in the pursuit format anything could happen. However, Olson obviously decided he was not going to waste any time in making the decisive move. The blue course starts out with a rolling downhill for more than a kilometer, it then turns sharply up the south ridge of the teal lake basin and sawtooth's its way up and down the ridge in a series of substantial climbs and curving down hills. At the top of the first herring bone climb up from the lake Olson had opened a gap and did not look back as he cruised to his first State Championship, and the first for a Copper Country boy. Luckily for Olson, he was not experiencing the excitement behind him.

Behind Olson, Evan Milton (MQT) had left himself in the tough position of 6th after day one, over a minute off the pace. But, he did not let that deter him, and with a nothing to lose and everything to gain attitude he set out to put the hurt on other racers in front of him. He started out next to Winkler and moved early on him. Next he looked for Cihak, whom was classic skiing for the first time in years, and he moved by him. Then he stalked down the big youngster, Pera, and moved up to third overall. But, he was not done. He still had one more person to reel in, Tiffany, and he did it while still in the first 5ks of the 8k course. That left only his frequent training partner Olson in front of him. Milton worked hard and at times seemed to be putting time on the champ, but the gap at the start of the day was definitely too much. The only real question now was who would have the fastest split and earn maximum team points. Each skied hard and at the line the results showed an equal first for split of the day. Next in was Tiffany, who was able to hold off the hard charging Pera and avoid an unprecedented UP sweep of the podium. Winkler moved up to fifth as Cihak fell back to sixth, and rounding out the top ten were: Jim Kreft (7th - TC), Ryan Tervo - who as freshman/first year JII put in a fine classic race - 5th best split (8th - TC), Chris Scott (9th - TC), and Jon Ault (10th - TC).

Traverse City Boys, as with the girls, showed its depth in the race filed and won the Boys Team Title. And, by virtue of winning both the girls and boys titles, they dethroned the defending champion Marquette skiers. Their return to dominance brought the State High School Over-All team trophy back to Traverse City, where it formerly had its only home up until 1998.

Following the State Meet the GLD JO team qualifiers were announced. They are:

- JII Girls:
  - Cassidy Edwards,
  - Ingrid Fjeldhiem
  - Kaye Helminen
  - Laura Meeker
- JI Girls:
  - Allison Cregg
  - Chase Edwards
- OJ Girls:
  - Mary Meeker
  - Meryl Estes
- JII Boys:
  - Jared Cregg
  - Stuart Kramer,
  - Dylan Pera,
  - Ryan Tervo,
  - Morgan Weir;
- JI Boys:
  - Bill Bradley,
  - Evan Milton,
  - John Olson,
  - Mick Tiffany,
  - Brad Winkler
- OJ Boys:
  - Joey Graci,
  - Erik Hemstead,
  - Andy Liebner,
  - Geoff Martin,
  - Adrian Ostrander (also Midwest Qualifier),
  - Tom Richardson

Reporting by Joe Haggemiller