

CALEDONIA – Challenges don't faze Emma Ruffin.

Being ultra-competitive always helps overcome obstacles or realize goals, but Ruffin also appreciates the importance of analyzing what she needs to change to deliver a different outcome.

That's the approach Ruffin took after she finished third in the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Class 4A Cross Country Championship as a junior. Ruffin admitted she was disappointed because she "always likes to win," but she didn't allow the close call to frustrate her.

"I looked at it as a learning experience," Ruffin said. "I had never gotten that close, and the two girls ahead of me were really competitive runners, and I had always run with them. I knew I needed to prepare stronger for the next season."

Ruffin met that challenge head on by adding to her training and tweaking her workouts to maximize her performance. On Nov. 4, 2023, Ruffin realized her goal of winning the championship with a time of 20 minutes, 8.15 seconds at Choctaw Trails in Jackson. She needed to deliver her fastest time of the season, which was more than nine seconds better than her previous best, to push past South Pontotoc's Macy Bain in the final 200 meters. Bain took second (20:10.72).

"Getting my best time of the season was even better to add on to it," Ruffin said.

Ruffin will try to add more best times to her resume in the spring when she competes as a distance runner on Caledonia High's track and field team. After that, Ruffin will prepare for her next challenges as a member of the cross country and track and field teams at Blue Mountain Christian University. Ruffin finalized those plans Jan. 8 during a signing ceremony at CHS.

“It is going to be the best of the best competing against each other,” said Ruffin, who plans to study elementary education and specialize in special education. She hopes to become a special education teacher. “I think it is going to be a really cool experience.”

Ruffin won three of her first seven races and finished in the top four of all of them to set the stage for the ultimate prize: the Class 4A title. She said she took motivation from her third-place finish as a junior because she saw how close she was and how hard the runners ahead of her worked and pushed. Ruffin also said the experience gave her confidence, and she credited coach Charla Lee, volunteer coach DJ Mowrey, a former triathlete coach, and her teammates for creating an environment in which she could thrive.

“Emma returned her senior season more determined than ever,” Lee said. “She had first place in her sights for herself, but she was also determined to encourage and motivate her teammates that they could really have a shot at first place as a team (Caledonia placed second to South Pontotoc). She has a natural drive to constantly improve.”

Lee feels Ruffin will “flourish” at Blue Mountain Christian University in part because she never sleeps on watching other teams and runners and seeing how she and her team compare.

But Ruffin didn’t always love to run. In fact, she said there was a time when she hated it. Prior to the ninth grade, softball was Ruffin’s sport, but that changed when her mother, Amber, who competed in cross country at Caledonia High, suggested she try cross country.

Ruffin’s career started innocently enough by running around her home. Those laps sparked something, though, that has transformed into a love for the sport. She said there is just something about the challenge of overtaking someone running in front of her that drives her.

“It is something I can do when everything is going wrong and I can just clear my mind,” Ruffin said. “The more I started to do it, the more I loved it. I loved the challenge and racing with people. I felt like I could push myself, and once I achieved goals it kept getting more exciting.”

Ruffin is looking forward to competing and training with student-athletes who love cross country and track and field as much as she does. She has gotten a taste of the college experience the last three years by attending a cross country camp at Blue Mountain Christian University, so she could be primed to tackle her next goals: dropping her times into the 18-minute mark for a 5-K race and winning some races.

Caledonia High Algebra II, College Algebra and AP Stats teacher Rebecca Studdard said Ruffin has a heart that serves others and allows her to answer any challenges and handle multiple responsibilities. She said Ruffin served faithfully as president-elect and president with the Anchor Club the past two years at CHS and was an inaugural member of Columbus’ Crown Club who helped establish the club and promote its values of character, leadership and a love for service to the community.

“Emma’s heart for service extends far beyond her work in Crown Club,” Studdard said. “In addition to her Crown Club hours, she has accumulated around 100 hours of community service volunteering with Caledonia Park and Rec, Caledonia Day, Market on Main, Salvation Army and other local organizations.

“What I love most about Emma is the heart with which she serves. She serves with humility. In Crown Club and in Anchor, Emma was always one of the first to volunteer, no matter how big or small the job.”

