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TRINITY - They may have taken different paths to reach the same destination, but Providence Grove High School's Laurel Bernhardt and Randleman High School's Freddie Mercado ended up exactly where they expected to be at the end of the Piedmont Athletic Conference Cross Country Championships Wednesday: As PAC champions.

Bernhardt, a sophomore, captured her second consecutive PAC title with a time of 21 minutes, 51 seconds, while Mercado continued a steady climb his senior season, finishing first in 18:48. The meet was held at Wheatmore High School.

The Wheatmore girls and Providence Grove boys earned PAC team titles.

Bernhardt finished more than one minute ahead of second-place finisher Scarlett Hildreth, a freshman at WHS, who finished in a time of 22:55.

"It was really great, it felt great," said Bernhardt about her second PAC title. "It was really colder than it has been and that was something my body had to adjust to. Wheatmore has some pretty big hills. It was a hard race, the hardest I ran this year."

Bernhardt has dominated county competition for two years. There have been some challenges from Hildreth, Uwharrie Charter Academy's Jazmin Palma, who placed third in the league meet, and PG teammate Lyndsay Browder, a freshman who placed fourth, but it's been Bernhardt leading the pack.

"Sometimes it's easier, but I might not know where some people are on the course," she said of being way ahead of the competition. "Sometimes it's hard for me to tell and that makes it harder. But overall, I like being that far ahead."

Bernhardt's biggest challenge has been the mental part of running..

"I kind of have to encourage myself to keep pushing through the race," Bernhardt said. "You can always do running-type drills in practice, but you have to keep saying in your mind to keep pushing yourself."

Bernhardt finished ninth at the Midwest Regional last year, earning a spot in the 1-A State Championships, where she finished 27th. This year's regional meet will be held at Fisher River Park in Dodson.



*2024 PAC Champion Laurel Bernhardt from Providence Grove. Photo provided.*

"My goal is to beat the school record at PG," Bernhardt said of the 21:09 that currently stands. "I want to beat that time and place higher than last year in the regional and state."

Mercado has seen a steady improvement since his sophomore year, the first year he ran cross country. After finishing fourth in the PAC Championships last season, he started this year by setting a personal best time of 18:30.71, which was 41 seconds better than his previous fastest time.

"I took training more seriously in the summer," said Mercado, who beat RHS teammate Jedidiah Dake by 10 seconds for the PAC title. "More mileage in the summer and that is what helped. The first meet was really good. It helped me and gave me a good amount of pride and set me up to have a good season."

Good is an understatement.



*2024 PAC Champion Freddie Mercado from Randleman.  
Photo provided.*

"He is a workhorse, he has a great work ethic," said RHS coach Aaron Bowman. "He's a real easy kid to coach. You ask him to do this workout, run this distance, he is going to do it. He's training through the summer, doing his runs on weekends. He's just getting it done. I watched him make small improvements and then he made a big jump this year."

After a solid season, he entered the PAC meet with a lot of confidence.

"I knew in my head, I am fit and I can trust my training," Mercado said. "All I had to do was execute. It was really, really tough. You have elevation, some big hills. I told myself to keep pushing, it will be over soon. You will get there."

He did, holding off the rest of the field.

"I heard people behind me the first mile, the second mile," Mercado said. "Once you get to the last stretch, I just told myself I had to finish strong. As soon as I crossed, I was happy, really happy. Being a conference champion is something I wanted to achieve this year."

The next goal is to qualify for the state meet. He finished 26th at regionals last year, which didn't qualify.

"I really am hoping I qualify for the state meet this year," Mercado said. "It's the same course I opened at with an 18:30 this year. I'm just really proud of myself, putting in all the training and taking pride with all the results."