Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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After seeing his team finish in the middle of the pack at the North Shore Conference meet last season, Port Washington boys' cross-country coach Mark Pasten is hoping for better things this fall.

It's not just wishful thinking, either.

With the best of last year's runners back in the fold, the Pirates are poised to show strength in numbers.

"We return all seven runners from our sectional team, and they are looking good," Pasten said.

"The kids worked really hard this summer. I think we will be in good shape."

Port, which placed fourth in the conference meet, is led by senior Jason Marhal, who developed into the Pirates' No. 1 runner. He was the Pirates' lone qualifier for the WIAA Division 2 state meet, capping the season with a 32nd-place finish.

Joining Marhal as the team's top runners are seniors Jack Skelton-Miller and Joe Bortolotti, juniors Bill Ernest and Taylor Godersky and sophomores Eagan Norman and Nick Michalowski.

Pasten also expects senior Alex Balister and junior Matt Froelich to contribute at the varsity level.

"It's a nice mix. There's not a big drop-off from one to seven, so our depth should be good," he said.

Marhal continued his strong junior season with an excellent track season and has stepped up as a leader again this fall, Pasten noted.

“I’m really expecting him to have a great year. He’s come a long way,” he said.

Pasten sees defending champion Whitefish Bay as the NSC title favorite this season, with Germantown, Homestead and Port battling for the top four spots.

Port will also face a new challenge in the WIAA tournament by being moved up to Division 1. Although that change puts the Pirates in a sectional meet usually dominated by Arrowhead, the Pirates still have a strong shot at state-qualifying spots, Pasten said.

Leaders back for Port girls

The Port girls won’t have the depth of their male counterparts this season, but they do have talent.

Senior Bianca Benkley and junior Abby Kotecki are back as the team’s No. 1 and 2 runners, respectively.

Benkley is a three-time state qualifier, having placed 36th in last year’s Division 2 final.

Among other varsity veterans, coach Joe Adamak’s squad also has junior Maggie Kotecki and sophomore Brenna Russell returning.

“I think all four will be improved, but we are looking for girls to fill the five, six, seven and eight spots,” Adamak said. “We just don’t have a lot of depth.”

Among newcomers to the program, freshman Alexa Brown “could figure in the mix,” Adamak said.

The Port girls placed fourth in last year’s conference meet, which was again dominated by Whitefish Bay. Adamak expects Bay to lead the way again, with Grafton in the fight for runner-up honors.

Both Port squads will open the season Saturday, Aug. 25, at the Jamie Block Invitational in West Bend. The meet, which groups runners by grade, starts at 9 a.m.

The Pirates will then participate in the Freedom Invitational on Aug. 31.

Image Information: Jason Marhal