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They've got talent

GAIL WOOD; Staff writer

They certainly weren't running prodigies, driven to win.

Not at first.

As a freshman at Olympia High School, a gangly Nate Brennand swam and ran cross country, turning out just to be with friends.

Joanna Sowers didn't even like running.

"I just turned out because my dad wanted me to," said Sowers, now a senior at Northwest Christian.

But that's all changed.

Smitten by success, both Brennand and Sowers came to the same epiphany – they've got talent.

Brennand, now a senior, placed seventh at the Class 4A state cross-country meet, finishing in 15 minutes, 42.8 seconds.

Sowers, who until recently thought of herself more as a basketball player than a runner, placed sixth at the 1B/2B state meet (19:37.8), helping Northwest Christian win its fifth consecutive state title.

They're The Olympian's top boy and girl runners for the all-area cross-country team.

Last year, Brennand dropped out of swimming so he could train through the winter, running as many 80 miles a week.

"I just decided that if I wanted to get better at running I needed to train hard," Brennand said.

It worked. In the spring, he broke his school's record in the 1,600 meters, running a race in 4:15.35 to place fourth at the state meet. In the fall, Brennand, getting up early to run twice a day, three times a week, ran the state's fastest 5K – 15:09 at the Stanford Invitational to place fourth.

“It felt awesome,” Brennand said.

But Brennand was frustrated when he couldn’t duplicate that time. Running all but five days during the three-month season, fatigue finally caught up with him.

“I was missing sleep. The overall stress,” Brennand said. “My season didn’t end as I had hoped. I was hoping to place higher.”

Brennand qualified for the annual Border Clash, where the top runners from Washington and Oregon race.

Brennand finished 27th out of 79 in Sunday’s race with a 5:19.4 in Beaverton, Ore.

“Getting seventh at state is amazing, but it’s not quite the race he wanted,” Olympia coach Jesse Stevick said. “To have a disappointing race and still finish seventh is impressive.”

Before Sowers would win league and district titles, she had to beat her teammate, Elizabeth Weber, the team’s No. 1 runner coming into the season. Asthma and an iron deficiency condition slowed Weber throughout the season, opening the door for Sowers.

“It was hard to pass her in races because she’s always beaten me,” Sowers said. “I just couldn’t pass her.”

Finally, midway through the season at the Steilacoom Invitational, Sowers finished ahead of a laboring Weber, changing Sowers’ outlook.

“I saw that it was my duty,” Sowers said. “I’m usually not the one to step up and be the leader. But I had to.”

A year ago, Sowers decided not to turn out for basketball so she could run through the winter and prepare for track. She had shown some promise in the 800 meters and she became aware of her talent. In the spring, she ran the 800 in the low 2:20s. Her cross-country coach, Larry Weber, an elite 800 runner in college, said he thinks Sowers could run a 2:15.

“She’s fast,” Weber said. “It’s very unlikely someone will pass her at the end of a race. She really put it together. She just got better as the season went along.”

So, Brennand and Sowers followed a similar path to reach the same goal. They gave up one sport to focus on running. It worked.

“Nate’s freshman year I wouldn’t have said he’d be a podium finisher at state,” Stevick said. “Last year in track, he definitely showed that potential. He’s such a hard worker.”

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2010 All-Area cross-country teams

BOYS

Nate Brennand, senior, Olympia A dedicated worker, he ran the state's fastest 5K. Placed seventh at 4A state meet, finishing in 15:42.8.

Justin Holden, senior, Northwest Christian A big-race runner, he came up with his best race at state. Ran in the Border Clash race. Won the 1B/2B state meet, finishing in 16:05.9.

Todd Jackson, senior, Elma After an injury-filled track season, he stayed relatively healthy, placing second at 1A state meet with a time of 15:47.5.

Dakota Parker, senior, Chehalis With a knack for going out fast, he had the speed and stamina, placing seventh at 2A state in 16:02.8.

Alex Temple, junior, Capital Got better as the season progressed, placing 22nd at 3A state meet, finishing in 16:18.3.

GIRLS

Joanna Sowers, senior, Northwest Christian Accepted role as team's No. 1 runner and improved as the season progressed, placing sixth at 1B/2B state meet in 19:37.8.

Hallie Whitley, freshman, North Thurston The ninth grader quickly became one of the area's top runners, winning district and placing 28th at 2A state meet in 19:51.5.

Avia Browning, junior, Capital Her team's top runner all season, she was a tireless worker. Placed 45th at 3A state meet in 20:02.

Ellie Justice, junior, Black Hills A steady performer, she had the knack of coming up with her best race in the biggest meets. Placed 44th at 2A state meet in 20:17.6 .

Hailey Bredeson, sophomore, Northwest Christian Got better as the season progressed, she placed seventh at 1B/2B state, finishing in 19:52.1.

Sofia Kane, freshman, Olympia Following a family tradition of running, she became her team's top runner as a freshman. Placed 80th at 4A state meet in 20:08.0.