

CALEDONIA – The permutations and scribbling yielded only one conclusion: The Caledonia High School girls and boys track and field teams were going to be champions.

In a season filled with firsts, personal-bests and school records, both teams still had to take care of business Monday at the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Class 4A State Meet at the Woody Barnett Track and Field Complex in Pearl.

Mission accomplished times two.

The CHS girls and boys made history in rousing fashion by scoring 89 and 108 points, respectively, to capture the first state championships in program history.

“I think they just decided early this year – and we had some really good seniors, and I hate to see them go – that they were going to show up every day and get after it,” said coach Cody Cliett, a 2015 graduate of Caledonia High who coaches the girls team. “In the past, there were girls and guys who would come one day and the next two days have an excuse why they couldn’t be there, but we hardly saw that this year.”

Cliett said he and boys coach Chris Harlow poured over the times and distances for the top teams and believed prior to the meet that both squads could take home top honors. The girls and boys may not have been as dominating as they were through the division, regional and super regional meets, but that didn’t prevent them from making history.

A year ago, the CHS girls had three qualify for the Class 4A State Meet and the boys team had only one, senior Micah O’Daniel.

The latest title was a continuation of a season-long theme that saw the girls team bank on Emma Ruffin, Peyton Kielman, Addie Shepherd and Ella Shepherd to score a lot of points in the distance events and to contribute to the relay teams. They didn’t disappoint, as Ruffin won the 800 meters (2 minutes, 25.82 seconds), Kielman took third in the 800

(2:33.85) and second in the 1,600 (5:44.20), Ella Shepherd won the 3,200 (12:23.94) and Addie Shepherd was fifth in the 1,600 (5:55.40). The 4x800 team also finished first (10:15.76), and the 4x400 team took seventh (4:30.57).

Cliett said the performances of Delani Clements (sixth in the 100, 13.00) and Taliya Carter (eighth in the 200, 27.62) marked the first time in his tenure as coach that the team had two qualifiers in the sprints, which helped it steal points from second-place Columbia (79.5 points), which didn't have any participants in those events. Clements also was eighth in the long jump (14 feet, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches).

The contributions of Sonniah Ramirez, who finished seventh in the discus (75-9), and Lacy Goins, who just missed qualifying for the state meet, as well as Nina Weinstein (second in the pole vault, 8-0) and Elizabeth Hunsucker (seventh, 6-6) added valuable depth to make the final scores reflections of the team's depth.

Liberty Hughes also finished second in the 400 (1:00.21) and second in the high jump (5-2), and Alexis Wilburn was third in the high jump (5-0).

The first state titles come on the heels of what are believed to be the first North State, super regional and regional championships for the girls team. Cliett said the team's district title also may have been its first. The boys team won its regional last year, but this year marked the program's first super regional and North State titles.

Considering CHS earned that hardware without a track at the school or access to one at a local college or university, the accomplishments validate Cliett's and Harlow's comments about the work ethic and determination of their athletes.

"I think (not having a track facility) helped us," Cliett said. "I think it kind of put a chip on our kids' shoulders going against all of these schools that are known for track. It's a testament to our kids wanting to show

up every day and not letting the circumstances determine the outcome.”

Said Harlow, “I think they believe in what we’re doing and our mission. We don’t have the facilities, but we find a way to make it work. We don’t have a long jump or triple jump pit and our kids still go out there and compete.

“We have a loop, we call it, that is marked off for 400- and 800-meter stuff. Our kids call it our track. With a track, what could we do? That is our biggest thing. I think the sky is the limit.”

Just as the girls team had its mainstays, the boys counted on distance runners Dylan and Carter Reed to bolster their team score. On Monday, Dylan won the 3,200 (10:16.37) and the 1,600 (4:43.47) and Carter won the 800 (2:00.50). The 4x800 team took fourth (8:50.14).

It also helps when you have what Harlow called “a special kind of athlete” in O’Daniel, who won the 110 hurdles (15.38), took second in the long jump (21-6), won the triple jump (46-9 $\frac{3}{4}$) and was third in the 300 hurdles (41.02).

“He is going to run track somewhere,” Harlow said. “He has a few schools looking at him, and he hasn’t made that decision, but he will have some more interest based on what he did at the state meet.”

Harlow said O’Daniel’s triple-jump efforts are close to Division I marks, which is even more impressive because Harlow said he may have had three hurdles -- at the most -- to train on before meets.

The 4x100 team also took third (43.93) and Johnathan Hughes was fourth in the 200 (22.67). Harlow said Hughes’ time was nearly three seconds faster than his best from last season, which is another indication of how hard the Cavaliers worked to make history.

“Cam (Coleman) did really well in the discus (second, 138-9), and Cayden Epps was predicted to finish maybe seventh in the triple jump,

and he had the lead for a while before he finished second with a personal-best of two feet (45-1),” Harlow said. “There were a lot of kids who surprised us. The 4x100 team was predicted to finish seventh. I am pretty sure they broke the school record.”

Coleman also finished seventh in the shot put (40-11 ½), Dontavious Binion was fifth in the high jump (5-10), Kolten Walters was eighth in the pole vault (8-6) and the 4x200 team was fourth (1:31.58).

“The kids practiced hard,” said Harlow, who is the defensive coordinator for the school’s football team. “I think they were hungry for it and they knew they could get it and they weren’t going to let it slip away. As a coach, you’re really proud of the fight they had in them. It is a great group of kids.”