

# Just not Central's day

## Nolin, Gibson only Bearcat place-winners in Class A track meet

By JOHN WILHEIM

FLINT — From the hungry runner who rang the phone well ahead of the scheduled wake-up call to the borrowed station wagon that overheated just as he was about to turn onto the highway that led back home, practically nothing went according to plan Saturday for Battle Creek Central track coach Jerry Saffell.

And that includes the Class A state meet.

Instead of contending for the team title, the Bearcats finished well back in the pack, winning just two medals, a far cry from Saffell's conviction that his squad would place in every event.

Shot putter Pete Nolin and low hurdler Marlin Gibson were the only Central competitors to bring home anything tangible from the Guy Houston Stadium event, which attracted a crowd of more than 3,000 fans.

But even their accomplishments were tinged with disappointment.

Nolin, second-seeded in shot on the basis of his winning throw in the Lansing Sexton Regional two weeks before, finished fourth. Only five inches separated him from second.

Gibson's frustration was even greater. Running in the inside lane, the speedy junior led the field in the final and fastest 330 heat most of the way. But after clearing the next-to-last hurdle, he turned to his right to see where his pursuers were and momentarily lost his balance.

By the time he recovered, three rivals had zoomed past him, relegating Gibson to the number four spot.

And they were the fortunate ones, remember.

"We didn't perform," Saffell said sadly. "It's happened to us up here (the state meet) every year. We've got the kids who can do it, we get the chance to do it, but we don't do it. You can't run average in a meet like this and do wind up with anything."

The Bearcats' total of 10 points didn't do much as put them among the top ten teams in the final standings. Flint Southwestern carted off the championship trophy with 35 points to 30 for runnerup Grand Rapids Ottawa Hills.

Five state records fell and another was tied during the meet, among them a blazing 47.1 in the 440 by Detroit Kettering's Deon Hogan, a soaring 6-10 high jump by Dennis Lewis of Ypsilanti and a spectacular 3:16.4 mile relay by Detroit Redford.

Saffell and his 11 athletes were already revving up the balky engine of the car by the time that last mark was shattered. BCHS' own crack mile relay unit fell victim to the same sort of ill luck that plagued the other two Central relays.

On one crucial handoff, the runner completing his leg was in the nearest lane, while the man who was supposed to take the baton from him was stationed in the farthest one. The quartet of Steve McCoy, Tim Sheppard, Bob McClenney and Gibson came in dead last in their five-team heat, in 3:28.5.

"I pulled guys, I didn't have them running in other things so we could do our best in the mile relay and see what happens?" asked Saffell, who had scratched McCoy from the 440 run to focus on the final race.

"It's a fact. When things go wrong, everything goes wrong."

If nothing else, the mile relay foul-up was a fitting ending to the meet for the Bearcats. The morning preliminaries hardly had begun before the first disaster struck.

Gerald Clayborn, who had the best high hurdle time of anyone in the state during one stretch of the season, plowed into each of the first four obstacles and was the fifth of seven men to reach the finish line. His time was 15.2, a full second over his best performance.

The uncharacteristic race left Clayborn covering his eyes in grief in the infield — and left him out of the running for the finals by a few hundredths of a second.

"He was moving too fast," sighed Saffell, a former hurdler himself. "He got out of the blocks so fast he wasn't ready to raise for the first hurdle, and then it was just like dominoes until he got everything back together."

Teammate Chris McCoy missed the cut for the hurdle semifinals, too. But his 15.4 was very good for a

sophomore. Clayborn is a senior, as was Ricky Bradley, knocked out of the 100 competition in the semis.

Gibson's tragic run came next. "I had it — damn!" said Gibson. "Then I looked at him and that was it. That's why I hate running in that first lane."

"He made a cardinal sin of hurdling," said Saffell, shaking his head at the memory of the race. "We tell everyone, 'Concentrate, concentrate, don't ever break your concentration for a moment.' He did and it made the difference."

"But he competed. He was ready mentally. I thought he did a fine job. So did Nolin." According to the senior weight man, he, too, was troubled by lack of concentration.

"My mind was on the way the wind was blowing, the screwy (throwing) ring they have here and a bunch of other things instead of what I was supposed to be thinking about," he admitted after recording a best toss of 53-3, nearly a foot under his winning regional effort.

The 880 relay was another nightmare for BCHS. All went smoothly on the first two legs, run nicely by a healed Tony Craig and Bradley.

But as Daryl Young made the last turn prior to handing off the anchorman Caper, he was jostled from the right by a Birmingham Groves runner. Young lost precious time while struggling to maintain his balance.

Birmingham Groves was disqualified for the jostle, but that didn't mean much to Central, whose last-place heat time of 1:33.1 stood all the same. Benton Harbor, which won the heat in 1:30.1, ultimately placed eighth in the event, good for three points and four medals.

Lakeview's Brad Wilson, the only non-BCHS Battle Creek area entry in the meet, placed sixth in his 880 heat in 2:00.0. "I got boxed in after the first quarter," he said. "I had to stop and go clear around. I wanted to do well this time, too, because it was my last time."

But it wasn't Wilson's day. At least he had plenty of company.



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