

CALEDONIA – Emma Ruffin wasn't going to let an opportunity to win a title elude her.

For nearly 5,000 meters, Ruffin followed her plan and ran her race, which on Saturday meant she trailed four or five runners for most of the Mississippi High School Activities Association Class 4A State Championship Meet.

But with a few hundred meters to go and a state title in the balance, Ruffin's plan hinged on her ability to push past South Pontotoc's Macy Bain.

"I never feel too confident because I don't want to get my hopes up, but I just push as hard as I can for every race," said Ruffin, a senior. "Coming into the final 200 meters, we were really side by side and I just knew I had to give everything I had."

Ruffin's final surge proved to be the difference as the Caledonia High School senior won the Class 4A State Meet with a time of 20 minutes, 8.15 seconds at Choctaw Trails in Jackson. Bain took second (20:10.72).

Ruffin said she normally does better when she follows the leaders, which was her plan Saturday. She said she felt confident and strong that she had enough left in the final stretch to power past anyone in what turned out to be the closest race of her career.

"With about 100 meters left, I got in front of (Bain) and I just had to push," Ruffin said. "It was a close fight to the end. She was two feet behind me. As I got closer to the finish line, I just pushed even harder."

Caledonia coach Charla Lee credited volunteer DJ Mowrey, a former triathlete coach, for helping Ruffin and the other runners understand the importance of formulating plans and sticking to them during the race. She also praised Ruffin for her leadership and encouragement of her teammates.

“Emma was our team captain, and she went above and beyond throughout the season, especially toward the end,” Lee said. “She messaged all of the girls individually and told them where they were and what they could do and encouraged them and urged them to strive for this time because she knew they could do it. I really appreciate her encouraging her teammates. She has really grown as a leader this year, and I am really proud of her.”

Ruffin won four of the eight races she competed in this season, and finished in the top five in each one. Most importantly, her winning time at the Class 4A State meet was more than nine seconds better than her previous best this season. Last season, Ruffin finished third at the Class 4A meet with a time of 20:31.

Lee said she knew Ruffin was going to record a faster time Saturday in part because Caledonia competed on its toughest course of the season a week earlier at the regional meet in Eupora.

“She ran an amazing race,” Lee said. “At the beginning, there were about five girls ahead of her. She was watching and running her own race. As they tired, she passed them little by little. At the end, I watched her pass another and she came around the corner and she kicked it into high gear.”

Lee also praised the entire team for finishing as state runner-up to South Pontotoc. With nearly every runner slated to return next season, Lee hopes the team can build off its growth and set its sights on a state title in 2024.

“I am very impressed with their drive and determination,” Lee said. “They didn’t give up. They passed as many people as they could. It really helped bumping up one of our eighth-grade runners (Addie Shepherd) to the varsity team.”

Ruffin will turn her sights toward track and field season and competing in the 800 and 3,200 meters. She has given a verbal commitment to compete in cross country and track and field at Blue Mountain College in Holly Springs and is looking forward to that opportunity. Ruffin also said she is proud she was able to accomplish a goal she set in the ninth grade.

“It was really amazing,” Ruffin said. “Ever since the ninth grade, I saw other girls win it and I thought it would be awesome to win a state title. I have gotten close, but this year I told myself I had to do it. It was really exciting getting to finish, and it was really awesome being part of a team that finished second. We have really grown as a team in the past few years, and it has been really awesome to be a part of that.”