

CALEDONIA – The footsteps surprised Addie Shepherd.

The Caledonia High School junior expected someone to be trailing her about one mile into the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Class 5A Cross Country State Championship, so it wasn't unusual to hear the familiar shuffle.

But this sound had Shepherd's attention because it was louder, which meant there was more than one runner behind her. Instead of focusing on that sound and starting to worry, the reigning Class 5A champion recalibrated. She told herself the outcome wasn't going to define her

because she already had won an individual state title in the sport and that she just had to run her race.

Around the second mile, Shepherd's ears perked up again and liked what she didn't hear. The sound of footsteps tracking the "hunted" had subsided and Shepherd had positioned herself for another victory.



"I told myself it's not anyone else's time to grow," Shepherd said. "It's mine. That's all that matters."

Shepherd's time of 20 minutes, 39.4 seconds helped her win her second straight Class 5A title in the five-kilometer race on Oct. 31 at Choctaw Trails in Jackson. Her victory helped the CHS girls finish second (43 points) to Brookhaven (41) in the fight for the team title.

Shepherd's victory marks the fourth year in a row a member of the CHS girls team has won a cross country state title. Ella Shepherd, Addie's sister, won the Class 4A crown in 2024. Emma Ruffin earned the Class 4A title in 2023.

"I definitely felt like the hunted and that there was a target on my back," Shepherd said. "I know (Lafayette High freshman Hazel Dawson) who was in second (21:09.56) had trained just for this situation because I went against her earlier in the season and it looked like she was training just for me. I prepared my mind and knew it was going to be a little harder to shake her off."

Peyton Kielman (sixth, 22:29.95), Bronwyn Hedgpeth (ninth, 22:34.56), Harper Bullard (10th, 22:46.19), Layton Clardy (17th, 23:57.59), Leah

Davis (20th, 24:26.16) and Lilly Smith (21st, 24:39.44) also competed for Caledonia.

CHS cross country coach Michele Shepherd tried to follow all the runners throughout the race. She wasn't able to track Addie each mile, but she was confident Addie was going to rely on her strengths and maintain her consistency, especially between the second and third miles.

"She doesn't get winded and her endurance is very good, so we told her not to be upset if she didn't build a big enough gap between runners after the first mile and just continue at that pace," Michele Shepherd said. "She can even step up the pace, which is really hard for a lot of runners."

Addie Shepherd's latest state title came on the heels of a first-place finish (20:39) at the Class 5A, Region 1 meet last month at Pontotoc High. The CHS girls earned the team title with 20 points to outdistance Pontotoc (42) and Lafayette (67). Kielman (second, 21:46), Hedgpeth (fourth, 23:29) and Bullard (fifth, 23:47) helped CHS take four of the top five places, while Clardy and Davis finished eighth and ninth (24:57, 25:13).

Addie Shepherd hopes the state title sets the stage for a successful track and field season. She plans to compete in the 1,600 and 3,200 meters and work with Kielman, who excels in the 400 and the 800, to give the CHS girls the potential to score a lot of points on the track.

Coach Shepherd said Addie had a lot of motivation coming off the 2025 state title and knowing Lafayette High's Dawson recorded several fast times during the cross country season. She feels the outdoor track and field season will be another opportunity for growth, just like the 2026 cross country campaign.

“I think at the start of the season she was really nervous,” Michele Shepherd said. “Our biggest competition is always in house, and Peyton Kielman came off an amazing track season that was just absolutely phenomenal. Addie loves Peyton and was so proud of her, but she thought she might catch her. They have a great relationship. The motivation Peyton provided pushed Addie not to skip practices or workouts and always try because there is somebody here who wants to beat you.”