A year ago, Wiregrass Ranch cross country runner Nikita Shah could barely finish a 5-kilometer race in less than 20 minutes, a far cry from her performance this year. The junior ran a 17:53.96 at the Class 3A state meet on Nov. 19 at Little Everglades Ranch in Dade City, the third straight week she has cracked the 18-minute mark and the fastest time of any girl from Pasco or Hillsborough counties at the event.

The performance was good enough for fourth place overall, the best finish of any Bulls runner in the school’s six-year history. Shah’s time would have made her the individual state champion in any of the other three class/final races.

‘I was aiming for fifth place because I was seeded sixth, but fourth is good for me,’ Shah said with a smile.

Last year Shah placed 27th at states, ten spots worse than how she ran as a freshman. The slowdown was caused by a bout of anemia that zapped her strength during her junior year. The trip to claiming that medal wasn’t easy. The Bulls girls coach Don Howard.

“The kids were out to prove they could perform like this,” Shah said. “Last year it kind of upset me to be getting worse instead of better when I was training hard, but this year it worked out how I wanted. It only means everything in the world to me basically.”

The trip to claiming that medal wasn’t easy for Shah as the anemia basically took away a whole year of training at a high level.

“It’s very satisfying as a coach to see her shape I’ve ever been in my peak later … This is the best shape I’ve ever been in my whole life. I can only thank my coach for that. Without him I couldn’t do anything,” Howard said.

The Bulls 232 points gave them seventh place, one spot off the best state performance in program history — quite a feat considering they had to replace four of their top-seven runners from last year.

“I told our principal at the beginning of the season that this was a rebuilding year for us, but the new girls just came on so well that we exceeded what we did last year,” Howard said.

Wiregrass Ranch picked up a couple of girls from other sports. Berlin Waters was only a soccer player last school year but decided to give cross country a try as well. The story was the same for Savannah Goode, who was focusing on cheerleading at this time last year.

“The Bulls boys took sixth by scoring 200 points, matching their best place at states. We were pushing to be the best team in school history,” said Wiregrass Ranch boys coach Chris Loth. “We were seeded ninth and we thought between sixth and fourth was a possibility. We were less than 10 points out of fourth place, and we’re happy with that. Our top three, Ermius, Sam, and David, had outstanding races. Ermius finished better than any other boy in school history. Outstanding exclamation mark to the end of a great season.”

Like the girls, the Bulls boys had to replace four of their top seven. ‘The kids were out to prove they could overcome that and I think they did,’ Loth said.

Wiregrass Ranch was led by Ermius Bireda’s 15th-place finish in 16:09.1, one spot and 1.64 seconds better than Land O’ Lakes’ Travis Nichols.

“Travis has beaten me most of this season, so this time I really wanted to win,” said Bireda, who placed 67th at the event last year as a sophomore. “I feel good and I’m excited for my senior year. I can’t wait to get near that time.”

Nichols, a sophomore, also improved his placing greatly from a year ago when he finished 68th.

“It gives me confidence to be somewhat near the top in my second time here,” Nichols said. “I was way near the bottom last year.”

Bulls senior Sam Hippely ran a 16:22.14 to take 26th in his final high school race.

“This course has been tough on Sam the last couple years, and he was able to redeem himself today,” Loth said. “It put a great end to a great career — a hall of fame career.”

Steenbrenner had a bit of a different story. The squad finished as the 2A state runner-up last year but could muster only 12th place in 3A this year by scoring 308 points. Land O’ Lakes’ 517 points made it 21st.

The girls 4A meet included Freedom and Wharton, which took 14th and 20th, respectively.

The Patriots were led by senior Ashley Smith’s 20:56.89, good enough for 67th overall. Wildcats junior Taylor Griffith took 93rd in 21:07.68.

By Kyle LoJacono

*klojacono@cnewspubs.com*

**Hennecke signs with the UT**

Land O’ Lakes senior Brad Hencke started playing baseball at age 5 as a first baseman and outfielder, but he quickly moved to the pitching mound to be at the center of the action.

“I like being in on every play,” Brad said. “I don’t like standing around waiting for the ball to get hit to me.”

The move seemed to have worked, as the left-handed starter inked his name to a letter of intent to play at the University of Tampa during the first day of early signing on Nov. 9.

“I liked the coaches, players and the campus,” said Brad, who plans to study sports management or business. “It’s a good university and close to home so my parents can come watch me play.”

Brad’s father, Karl Hencke, said he only considered going to the University of Tampa because Brad wanted to play for a state school.

“At that point, it was the best,” Karl said. “He’s a little bit since the team has had it and it would be a nice thing to do.”

**By Kyle LoJacono**

*klojacono@cnewspubs.com*

Land O’ Lakes senior pitcher Brad Hencke as he signs his letter of intent to play baseball at the University of Tampa. (Photo by Kyle LoJacono)