

Emma...continued from Page 1A

Garrison stretched her lead to 20 seconds over Fletcher, before the Westminster senior dropped out of the race.

Coming down the Home Stretch, Garrison maintained her 15-20 second lead, and a roar could be heard from the Union County faithful as their young star topped the final hill and crossed the finish line in first place.

Union County Head Coach Jackie Hughes gave her young runner some advice before the race and Garrison took it to heart.

"I told her to see how she felt at the beginning of the race, and if she felt like she could go out and get the lead early, then to do it," Coach Hughes said. "If the front group was moving really, really fast and she wanted to hang with them for a while, to just do that. I guess she felt it, because she had a super start. She took off and never slowed down or looked back."

Even more impressive was the fact that she remained strong throughout the race and never wavered or allowed the competition a sliver of hope.

"Her form never broke," Coach Hughes said. "She maintained good form through the whole race. She kept the same form the whole way and seemed so focused and she was on, so she felt like she could get out front and stay there."

According to Coach

Hughes, it became evident about a month ago that Garrison could compete at the State Meet.

Union County raced the Unicoi Meet in early October where Coach Hughes realized that Garrison had a shot.

Then a few days later at Buford, Garrison would defeat White County's Jenna Gearing – the eventual Class AAA State Champion.

"A State Championship became realistic after the Unicoi meet," Coach Hughes said. "Then she beat the girl from White County at the Buford Meet. Between those two meets it became a real possibility that she could contend at State."

"As she's gained confidence she started jumping out into the lead and maintained it," Coach Hughes added. "The last several races she just took off, got the lead, and never looked back."

As for the future, Garrison, the Union County freshman, has a bright one.

"I just want to keep trying harder every single time out and I really want to see if I can get below the 19-minute mark," Garrison said.

Todd

continued from Page 1A

State Champion just five years earlier, said "I hope she can keep it up," a nervous Hughes answered.

So I made my way to the finish line where Blairsville's Duane Busse was waiting for Emma.

We began to get ahead of ourselves by discussing what a State Title would mean to Union County High School.

A few minutes later, we spotted Garrison coming up the final hill and realized that we were about to witness history.

After the dust settled and I made the long drive home from Carrollton, I started to think about what this really means for UCHS.

This was the first UCHS State Championship that I had ever witnessed, in person. I started thinking back to my days at UCHS. The first thing that came to mind, was the 1995 baseball season.

I was a young outfielder on a Panther team that made a



Union County freshman Emma Garrison crosses the finish line in Carrollton on Saturday. She's all alone and the first to cross. She becomes the first female state champion in UCHS history. Photo/Todd Forrest

The *North Georgia News* extends a hearty congratulations to Emma Garrison for her iconic feat.

The name Emma Garrison will now stand the test

of time and always will be the answer to a local trivia question.

Again, congrats Emma. We look forward to your future with great anticipation.

run to the State Finals, where we fell to Pace Academy.

Then, I recalled the time, a few years later when I rode to Macon to cheer the Lady Panther basketball team in the State Finals. I stood on the front row of the Macon Coliseum, in my purple "Pit Crew" shirt watching the GAC Lady Spartans celebrate a victory over our Lady Panthers.

I thought about each one of the State Tournament games I had witnessed our Lady Panther Softball team play, chasing that elusive State Championship.

Finally, I reflected on the stories I had heard of the 1971 Union County boys State Runner-Up basketball team.

"If only Danny Aaron hadn't fouled out," they would say. "If we hadn't of blown that big lead at the end," I've heard a dozen times.

Yet in each instance, Union County was close, but no cigar.

At that point I realized what I had just witnessed in Carrollton.

Not only had I wit-

nessed a State Championship, I had witnessed a freshman lay waste to the best private and public school runners in Georgia's Class AA.

So what does the future hold for Emma Garrison? Where does she go from here?

After speaking with her, her coach, and her teammates, I realized that we couldn't ask for a better representative of Union County than this young lady.

Always humble and always striving to get better.

She was an unknown at the start of the season. Yet she was willing to put in the work to perfect her craft and her hard work has paid off.

If this young freshman continues to dedicate herself to her craft, nobody will be able to touch her on the course.

Keep working, Emma. Don't become complacent. Set your goals high and keep chasing them. Now you've got a bullseye on your back. But if you keep working hard, your back is all the competition will see for three more years.

Todd Forrest covers sports for the *North Georgia News*.

Fall Games...continued from Page 1A

It takes as many volunteers as athletes to stage these events, which are a blessing for their families as well.

"It's as much for the families as it is for the athletes," said volunteer and House of Prayer Interdenominational Church Pastor Jerry Helton. "One of the parents got here earlier in the day and I told them that if they wanted to go on inside they could. She said, 'no, we want to stay out here and watch our son get off the bus and come through this line of people.'

"So it's not only for the athletes, it's also for the families of all these great people who are participating," he said. "It's very rewarding to be a part of this."

Prior to the events at First Methodist, Galaxy Bowling played host to the games, where the Towns County High School Cross Country teams and Head Coach Jeannie Ledford were there to assist and support the athletes as they knocked down pin after pin.

For some bowlers it was their first game, while others looked like seasoned veterans. Regardless of the scores, the bowling alley was a "strike zone" of exhilaration for all in attendance.

Upon leaving the bowling alley, the athletes were provided with a police escort to the church.

One thing the athletes, teachers and parents enjoyed was the police motorcade led by School Resource Officer Sally Tanner and the Union County Sheriff's Office and the Blairsville City Police De-



Galaxy Bowling and First United Methodist Church of Union County played host to the 2012 Special Olympics' Fall Games. Photo/Todd Forrest

partment from the bowling alley to the church, Tracy said.

"They thought that was really cool," Tracy said.

Before the games opened at First Methodist, Helton asked Special Olympic athlete and Towns County High School Homecoming King, Sonny Goodman to read the Special Olympics Motto.

"Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave

in the attempt," Helton and Goodman read.

Everyone who partici-

pated or had a hand in the Fall Games is a winner and their bravery was on full display.

Not only their bravery in the games, but in life as well. Their bravery is an inspiration to us all to conquer every obstacle put in our path, and these athletes tackle each one with no excuses.

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in memory of

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