

ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

ADLER HAS LOTS TO CHEER ABOUT

The Northwood senior receives a top honor after a phenomenal debut season in cross country.

By ZACH CAVANAGH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The cross country world probably hasn't seen anything like Northwood senior **Erika Adler**. Heck, the sports world hasn't seen much like her.

It has the makings of a plot from a cheesy movie. The high school cheerleader joins the sports team and instantly becomes a star, winning every title in sight.

Adler did that and more this year, her first and only season running cross country, and now she has been selected as the Register's Orange County girls cross country athlete of the year.

"This season was amazing," Adler said. "One of my greatest high school memories. It was a really big surprise. I didn't know was this, I guess, good?"

After three years of

cheerleading at Northwood, Adler joined the school's track team on a whim in March and hasn't looked back since.

"I just remember that I was getting a little bored with cheerleading and wanted to try something new," Adler said. "High school is only once in your life. My dad told me to try out for the track team. I liked running for fun."

After having success in track last spring, Adler took on cross country this fall.

She had remarkable performances right from the start. She won the Woodbridge Classic, only the second cross country race she had run, and posted many more highlights. The only time she fell out of the top four was at Nationals.

Northwood coach **Louie Muniz** had no idea the level of talent that walked onto



BILL ALKOEFER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Northwood's Erika Adler finished second at the O.C. Championships, won the Pacific Coast League finals, finished fourth in the CIF-SS Division 2 Finals and just missed winning the state Division 2 championship.

his team.

"To be honest, we don't really even know what she's capable of," Muniz said. "She keeps breaking the ceiling. I don't want to

jinx it, but maybe that's where she belongs, alongside the national leaders."

Adler continued to succeed and improve throughout the season. She fin-

ished second at the O.C. Championships, won the Pacific Coast League finals and finished fourth in the CIF-SS Division 2 Finals, which gave her a spot in the CIF State meet.

"(O.C. Championships was) when I started to go, 'she's even better than I thought she would be,'" Muniz said. "The kids she was racing were seasoned kids. She also felt, 'this is the first time I raced them and I can beat them the next time.'"

Muniz changed Adler's approach from seeing if she could stay with the top pack and make a late move to going out and being the pacesetter. It almost worked to perfection as Adler finished just five-tenths of a second out of first place in a three-way photo finish at the CIF State race.

Adler's run at CIF State earned her an on-the-spot invitation to the prestigious Nike Cross Nationals.

"I was still trying to get my bearings (after running

the state race) and some guy was like, 'hey, want to go to the Nike nationals?'" Adler said of how she received the nationals invitation. "I was still trying to breathe and get back to my senses. I was over the moon. I was so excited."

Adler fell during the second mile on a muddy course at Nationals and finished in 50th place, but that didn't put a damper on what she accomplished.

Her success this season has Adler interested in running in college, and she has started to get recruiting offers, something, she said, she couldn't have imagined six months ago.

It has also put her front and center for Northwood's cross country program.

"A couple girls have come up to me and said I'm their role model," Adler said. "It's really nice. I'm pleased to be a role model because I like helping people and showing nothing's too late (to try) and to always do things 100 percent."