Sometimes life just isn't fair. Take Watauga High senior Darby Middlebrook, for instance. A state champion in 2010, a state runner-up last fall, and a two-time regional champion, Middlebrook was aiming her sights on winning her second state

title in three years. But those ambitions were derailed in mear moments last Saturday.
In the blink of an eye, Middlebrook, who was pacing the field at the Class 4A Western Regional at McAlpine Park in Charlotte, was seen leaving the race at the two-mile marker in shock and disappointment. Middlebrook broken leg, and any chance of capturing a state championship in her final cross country race at the high school level.
"Those things happen," said WHS coach Randy McDonough. "Luckily, the fracture didn't go all the way through, so she won't have to have surgery. She will be on crutches, and she can't put any weight on her leg for four weeks. She can start swimming four weeks after that, and then she can resume running again. But the injury isn't stopping her.
"She plans on being at the state meet Saturday rooting on her teammates. She felt worse for her teammates after the injury, instead of feeling bad for herself. That's the type of person she is. Yes, it's a disappointment, but Darby still has the spring track season, four years of college and probably more races to run after that. This is just a small blip on the screen."
And while Middlebrook concentrates on getting healthy, the Pioneers will make their way to Beeson Park in Kernersville, N.C., for the North Carolina High School Association Class 4A state cross country championships on Saturday.
The WHS men, who qualified thanks to a third-place finish at regionals last week, hope to build on their impressive showing last season at the state meet. The Pioneers, led by all-state runner Peter Vandenberg, finished sixth. But Vandenberg, who was eighth at state last fall, has been hampered by a foot injury that's plagued him since last spring.
"I really felt we could win the (Northwestern 3A/4A) conference and do well at regionals with Peter on the mend," McDonough said. "But this is going to be his final race on Saturday, and I'm expecting him to give it all he's got. I'm very confident in Peter; he's an excellent runner."
Vandenberg finished 20th at regionals last week in 16:59. But during Vandenberg's struggles, senior Josh Anderson has stepped it up this season. Anderson has been WHS' top runner all year. He finished second at the NW3A/4A championships (but he was the top Class 4A runner) and he finished third at regionals last Saturday. And Anderson shaved more than a minute off his time. He ran a 16:59 at the conference championships; he ran a 15:50 last weekend at regionals.
"But I'm still not happy with my times," he said. "I really want to be in the 15:30's. But I hung with some of the top runners in the state last week at regionals, so that gives me a lot of confidence going to state this weekend. And I like the course (Beeson Park) we're running on. It's got more hills, and that plays to my strength."
Anderson turned in a 15th-place finish last year at state finishing the race in 16:18.
"And I really believe he can crack the top ten and make all-state this season," McDonough said. "He's come a long way since his freshman year. It would be a rewarding finish to his career."
The WHS women, who failed to qualify a team, will be represented by seniors Doria Kosmala and Madison Harman. Kosmala finished 12th (18:59) at regionals last Saturday; Harman was

13th (19:05). For Kosmala, this will be her first visit to Beeson Park; for Harman, it will be her third appearance (she qualified as a freshman, but missed the race because she got the flu) at state.

And Harman turned in a strong effort last year finishing 14th in 18:42.

"And that was my best effort and it came on a wet track," Harman said. "But it will feel a little funny not having Darby out there. She's our leader, she's a great friend, and I really look up to her. Training with her has helped me so much. That's why it hurts so much to see her get injuried like that. When I saw her walking off, I wanted to help her so bad. But I knew I couldn't. But losing her really motivated me. It made step up my pace that much more."

"Darby is such a leader and a great friend to all of us," Kosmala said. "We found out from our other teammates during the race that she got hurt. Then when we saw her walking off, we knew we had to step it up for her. I had a strong finish, in last week's race, and I'm ready for Saturday."

The men's Class 4A race begins at 10:30 a.m.; the women's Class 4A race starts at 11:30 a.m.