

Yankton High School



## Press & Dakotan Female Athlete Of The Year



JAMES D. CIMBUREK/P&D

Yankton senior Savannah Woods poses in front of the scoreboard at Williams Field. Woods, a state champion in the 3200-meter run this spring and state runner-up in cross country, has been selected as the *Press & Dakotan's* Female Athlete of the Year.

# Yankton's Woods Returns To Top

BY JAMES D. CIMBUREK  
james.cimburek@yankton.net

For many athletes, greatness is fleeting. Once it achieved and lost, it is seldom achieved again.

That is part of what has made the career of Yankton senior Savannah Woods special.

A state cross country champion as a freshman, Woods battled through nearly two years' worth of struggles before turning a corner and winning the Class AA 3200-meter run at the 2015 South Dakota State Track and Field Championships, then following that up with a runner-up finish in the state cross country meet this past fall.

Her return to the top has earned the future South Dakota State Jackrabbit the *Press & Dakotan's* 2015 Female Athlete of the Year honor.

After winning the state cross country meet as a freshman and finishing third as a sophomore, behind fellow Gazelle Annie Kruse (now at Augustana), Woods began to see fewer top results.

"There were some times where things didn't go the way we had planned. The end result was not always the end result we were looking for," said Yankton head track and field coach Luke Youmans. "And we had a couple of ESD and a couple of state meets where, if you ask her or

### Previous Winners

2006: Amber Hegge, Crofton  
2007: Amber Hegge, Crofton  
2008: Abby Burbach, Yankton  
2009: Bethany DeLong, Laurel-Concord  
2010: Chrissy Strassburg, Elk Point-Jefferson  
2011: Devon Brecke, Wagner  
2012: Lexi Steffen, Cedar Catholic  
2013: Keely Bertram, Elk Point-Jefferson  
2014: Allison Arens, Quinn Wragge and Maria Wortmann, Crofton

you ask me, we'd probably both use the same word, 'disappointing.'"

Yankton cross country coach Dave Dannenbring also saw the pressure piling on the young Woods.

"She had a lot of pressure going into her sophomore year. She was the state champion, and people kinda expected that she could be state champion every year. That's tough to live up to," he said. "Many girls, once they experience that disappointment, you never hear from them again. They find other activities where they don't have to deal with that pressure."

At the same time, Woods was pushed from being the youngster in a group of veteran runners to the veteran in a group of youngsters. Gone were Kruse, Jenna Grossen-burg and Whitlee Larson (both of which went to SDSU), replaced by youngsters like Madason McClure.

That challenge also kept the senior the younger girls call "Mama Sav" on her toes.

"I can't just push them and not push myself," Woods said. "I had to push us all together to do the best that we could."

Woods finished 16th at state cross country in 2014, her lowest placing since 20th as an eighth grader. Rather than resign herself to being a lower-tier runner, Woods decided to do something about it.

"Something just clicked in my mind that I needed to work really hard, because I wasn't just naturally good anymore," she said. "I needed to keep pushing myself to keep getting better because other people are going to come up and be better than me."

Part of that process was learning that training for both cross country and track was not a three-month process, but a year-round one. Woods began to train more heavily in the off-season, both in added mileage and in the weight room.

Those efforts were evident as Woods came back from an injury early in the fall, requiring her to shut down her training for a week as she recovered.

"It was a rough couple of first days, then I was right back into it," she said. "I started running with the boys, and that's when I realized that

the hard work was starting to pay off."

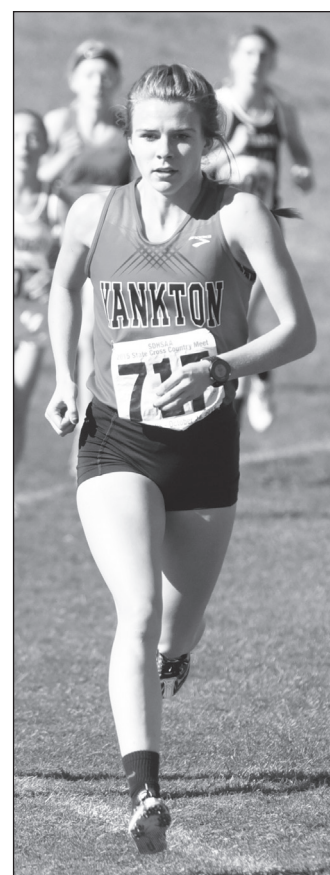
Woods won the Norfolk Invitational and the Brookings Quad, and finished in the top three in two other major meets. After a sixth place finish in the Eastern South Dakota Conference meet, she bounced back to lead much of the race before finishing second at state.

Her finish was the fifth top-25 placing and third top-three mark of her career. She was the first Gazelle with five state cross country medals since Kristin Sternhagen claimed six (2002-07), and the first with three top-three places since Besty Bies earned four from (2003-06).

"Regardless of where the spring goes, her time here is going to be up there with any of the girls we've had in years past," Youmans said. "The other part is that this spring isn't the end-all. She's got more years of running in front of her at the collegiate level."

Before Woods trades her Gazelle red and white in for Jackrabbit blue and yellow, she has some high marks in mind.

"I want to run a sub-five (minute) mile (1600-meter) and a sub-11 two-mile (3200-meter) this year," she said. "It motivates me a lot, knowing that I can be one of the top 10 Gazelles if I run just under five minutes



P&D FILE PHOTO

Woods competes in the 2015 South Dakota State Cross Country Meet.