Bear Lake’s Elli Kelsey (104) and Elise Kelsey (103) run in the 2A girls cross country state championship Nov. 2, 2019 at the Portneuf Wellness Complex in Pocatello.

Unlike her freshman year, Kelsey wore the target of ‘top dog’ as a sophomore. Her competitors watched her come out of nowhere to win state as a freshman, but wouldn’t be caught off guard this time.

It rarely mattered for Kelsey. She opened her sophomore campaign with a win at the Terry Jonov Invitational. A week later, she was 10th in the field of 164 at the Cardinal Classic, only finishing behind runners from Idaho-Ad and 3A classifications.

She followed it with victories at the Tiger/Griz Invitational, Bob Firman Invitational, Pirate Challenge and Bob Conley Invitational.

She was briefly humbled at the Preston Invite, where twin sister Elise edged her to win, but got back on track at the 2A District 5 championship meet, where she ran a personal-best time of 18 minutes, 24 seconds to beat the field by 154 seconds.

I remember her freshman year, she was super nervous before every race,” Vickers said.

“This year, she was a little more calm and had her legs under her.”

After this district meet, Ellis’ confidence surged. Tiger/Griz racecourse (copy)

Bear Lake’s Elli Kelsey competes during the Tiger/Griz cross country meet at Russ Freeman Park on Friday, Sept. 13, 2019 in Idaho Falls.

John Roark/Post Register

For one, she was on track to defend her state title. McCaul-Dondely’s Sophia McManus, Ellis’ biggest threat and the state runner-up a year earlier didn’t even win her own district and ran 13.5 seconds slower than Ellis on their only common course of the season.

Second, the state meet was to be held at Postonbluff Portneuf Wellness Complex, where Ellis had run the three fastest races of her career — including the district meet she had just won. She felt good about improving her time even more and breaking 17 minutes.

Third, Bear Lake had a real shot to unseat Soda Springs as 2A state champ. The Cardinals had won the previous three state titles, but Bear Lake posed a challenge with Ellis, Elise and their senior sister, Josi, Kelsey all contenders to finish in the top five.

But on race day, everything went wrong. Ellis finished second, nearly 15 seconds behind McManus.

She didn’t improve her time, instead running 24 seconds slower than she did at district nine days earlier on the same course. And Soda Springs extended its title streak to 14, outrighting Bear Lake by 18 even though the Kelsey sisters finished second, third and fifth.

“That race was really off for me,” Ellis said. “It was just a weird kind of a race. I didn’t get my best time; and I just didn’t feel very good. It was just a weird day for me, I guess.”

That left Bear Lake’s ultimate competitor with some unfinished business.

With no track season to look forward to, she just has more time to train for next season. Ellis and the rest of Bear Lake’s cross country runners plan to log 400 miles this summer. Ellis hopes it helps her, and the Bears, rise to the top of 2A.

“Get my state championship title back,” Ellis said after goals for next season. “And then a team, we’re already training for cross country for next year. We have a group chat with all the freshman coming up and we’re going to run 400 miles over the summer. We have big plans. We’re going to work rea-

ally hard this season to get better.”

Just remember, the little girl in the Bear Lake jersey isn’t as harmless as she looks.

“She’s a competitor. She’s al- ways going to compete,” Vickers said. “If I chopped off her legs, she’d still compete.”