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Ailing Kristin Zarrella wins Classic run

By MIKE HENRY

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BRADENTON - Kristin Zarrella considered pulling out of Monday's 16th annual Canes Cross Country Classic when she awoke with a sinus infection and throbbing headache.

But the 13-year-old Haile Middle School eighth grader didn't want her parents to forfeit the \$15 entry fee. More important, she didn't want the "Go Kristin!" sign her mother Kathi had made, complete with a large heart, to go to waste.

"She is my motivation for everything," the younger Zarrella said.

Battling through her discomfort, Zarrella ran the 5K (3.1 miles) distance at G.T. Bray Park in 20:19, more than a minute slower than her personal best. But it was fast enough to stave off fellow eighth-grader Hannah Howell of Saint Stephen's by three seconds for the overall women's title. About 150 women and girls competed.

"I hadn't been feeling well at all and my head was kind of pounding, so it was hard," Zarrella said Monday night. "But I was already paid, it's a fun race and I wanted to see everyone. If I had been feeling worse, I would have taken it slower.

"I guess I wasn't feeling too bad. I have this competitive drive in me, and I always try to win and go for the gold. Hannah is the same way. We are both very competitive."

Zarrella and Howell are teammates on the FC Sarasota girls soccer team. Both are midfielders.

"It was very close at the end and Hannah was right on me," Zarrella said. "I think she was sick, too. It's fun running against her because she always gives me a challenge. She pushes me, and I like having that from someone my age."

Even though she still is in middle school, Zarrella thrives on challenges, and her results are proof. At the AAU National Junior Olympics in Detroit last month, Zarrella finished second in the nation in her age group in the 1,500-meter run with a time of 4:58 and was seventh in the 3,000 with a time of 10:53, earning All-American status in both events.

Zarrella has qualified for the AAU Nationals three years in a row.

Earlier this summer, Zarrella trained with the Lakewood Ranch High girls cross-country team. She intends to enroll in Lakewood Ranch next year.

Mustangs coach Mary Quinn, who won the Masters (40-and-upward) Division of the Canes Cross Country Classic in 22:11, may soon put up a calendar in her kitchen to cross off the days until Zarrella enters high school.

"She is an outstanding runner in her age group. When we got together this summer, I saw that she runs with ease. She's a natural," Quinn said. "She seemed to get along with the girls really well. She is very talented and I'm looking forward to her joining the team."

Devin McDermott was the top Mustangs finisher in a time of 21:50, good for second place behind Howell in the Girls 13-15 Division. Other top Lakewood Ranch finishers and their times included Megan Reuss, 22:45; Hailey Stoffel, 23:12; Tracey Spronatti, 23:32; and Kelsey Grimaldi, 23:41.