

Five Fast Girls (published September 30, 2020)

As of September 21, six Nebraska girls had run faster than 19:00 this season, and I reached out to the five fastest to see how their seasons are going and what goals remain. It was an interesting mix – Kaylie Crews of Papio South, Hannah Godwin of Kearney and Jaedan Bunda are seniors, while Claire White of Westside and Stella Miner of Omaha Marian are freshmen. Two had strong sophomore seasons followed by disappointing junior campaigns, while the two freshmen had never raced the 5k distance before this fall.

Freshman Stella Miner of Omaha Marian is perhaps the biggest surprise on the Nebraska distance running scene, primarily because virtually no one in Nebraska had heard of her before mid-July. After spending most of her life in New Jersey, her family decided to relocate to Nebraska to improve their quality of life. Her dad had lived in Nebraska as a youngster, but the family had virtually no ties to Omaha. Fortunately, Stella was able to join Marian's summer conditioning program soon after her arrival, and running has been a great way for her to make friends and adapt to a new school.

Prior to COVID, Stella focused most of her attention on competitive swimming, a sport she hopes to participate in at Marian. She ran track in 6th and 7th grade, but she didn't run in 8th grade due to a stress fracture that likely occurred when she was a bit ambitious on ramping up mileage after the end of swim season. Despite her relative lack of racing experience prior to high school, Stella ran 5:16 in the 1600 in both 6th and 7th grade.

Omaha Marian Coach Roger Wright tried to keep expectations low for Stella, simply telling her in August that she'd likely be in his 'A' group of runners. She'd done a bit better than that. In four races, she's run 19:16 (Westside, her first ever 5k race), 19:01 (Seward), 18:56 and 18:51 (both Walnut Creek). While the Westside course was table flat, the Seward and Walnut Creek courses are both considered to be rather difficult.

As Stella has added race experience, she's adapted her race strategy. With absolutely no idea how fast she could run, at the Westside meet she stuck with a pack for much of the race while Kaylie Crews and Claire White went out quickly. At Seward, Jaedan Bunda of Skutt developed a large lead by the one-mile mark, but Stella cut the margin to 14 seconds by the end of the race. At Stella's first Walnut Creek race, she decided to stay with Kaylie and Claire for as long as she could, and was able to outkick them in the last 400 meters to win by 6 seconds over Claire and 7 over Kaylie. This past Saturday, she ran alone for the entire race, setting another PR of 18:51 while winning by 1:25.

Stella is achieving this success despite a limited mileage base. She was running about 10 miles per week this summer prior to her arrival in Omaha, increased it to 20 per week when joined the Marian summer conditioning, and is now at about 30 miles per week. She reported that the biggest adjustment to high school running has not been the mileage, but rather that the heat and humidity in Nebraska is much worse than where she lived in New Jersey, roughly 60 miles from the ocean.

The Marian team has had a strong year, winning 3 of 4 meets. They've traded victories with Papio South in head-to-head meetings, edged Millard West in early September, but they won't run against Fremont or any Lincoln schools until at least Districts. They certainly hope to qualify for State.

With only four races in her career, Stella hasn't set any specific goals. She'd like to continue to compete with the top runners in state, but she has no idea what the State meet will be like. Her coaches have emphasized that she should focus on giving her best effort at each race rather than worrying about the outcome, and she's tried to embrace that philosophy.

Stella has lived in Omaha for just over two months and has been at Marian for 45 days, so she's still trying to get acclimated. She's already been exposed to speech and debate at Marian, and she's excited to join the Speech team this year. Marian is currently teaching in a hybrid model (two days at school, two days online), but she's doing her best to meet classmates and form stronger bonds with her teammates.

I wrapped up the interview by asking Stella what has been the biggest difference she's noticed between New Jersey and Nebraska. She responded that it was the people. The adults and students she's met are more open than the people she would meet on the East Coast. It's funny," she said, "people here will just wave at you for no reason." She's making herself at home in Omaha, especially on the cross country course.

Claire White, a freshman at Omaha Westside, has raced the 5k distance just three times this season, and will likely only race once more before Districts due to the Omaha-area coaches' approach for COVID. Her three races have been exceptional: an 18:56 at Westside, 19:02 at Walnut Creek, and 18:39 at Fremont. She's had the challenge of racing Kaylie Crews in all three races, edging Kaylie by one second at Walnut Creek, and then losing touch in the two other races when Kaylie went out so quickly. Claire has finished 2nd in all three races, and she has the second-fastest time in Nebraska this year.

Similar to Stella Miner, Claire didn't have any specific goals before the season. Her coaches told her that she could break 20:00, and in retrospect they may have been trying to limit the pressure on her. She is not new to cross country racing, having competed for Westside Middle School in both 7th & 8th. She's also not new to strong performances, finishing 4th and 2nd at the State junior high meet in those two years. However, she has never run track; she was injured in 7th grade and the season was cancelled due to COVID in 8th grade. Claire noted that summer conditioning, which was the most mileage she's ever run, was 'a slap in the face' for the first few weeks. She ran about 300 miles this summer, averaging 25-30 miles per week. Her longest run this year has been 10 miles.

Claire almost seems to float when she runs, and that may have something to do with her other primary hobby. She's been an Irish dancer since 2nd grade, and she has dance practice five days per week with approximately 2.5 hours of dancing at every practice. She typically competes in 6 to 8 feiseanna (a feis, pronounced 'fesh', is an Irish dance competition) per year, although that number will fall to 3 or 4 this year due to COVID.

Claire didn't say much more about her Irish dancing, but I later learned through a friend that Claire is competing at an incredibly high level. As an 8th grader, she qualified for the World Irish Dance Championships in Dublin. It's an exceptional achievement – at most, one or two Nebraskans (and often none) qualify for Worlds each year. Unfortunately, the April 2020 championships were cancelled, but she is scheduled to compete in Dublin next April.

Westside's chances to qualify for State appear to be improving as the season progresses. After running just three varsity athletes in the first race, the team was more competitive this past Saturday with four freshmen in their top 6. Two juniors are training partners with Claire and have placed in the top 15 in all three races: Reese Young-Oestmann and Noelle Abels ran 19:40 and 20:07, respectively, this past Saturday.

With so much time on her feet between running and Irish dancing, Claire's coaches talk to her almost every day about how she feels and whether she needs a down day. Coach Jon Preister is helping offset her lack of experience with tips on how to plan a race, how to mentally prepare, and which parts of a practice are the most important. After seven years of dancing, Claire has learned that stretching after dance practice is the key to staying healthy.

When I spoke to Claire on September 22, she had one sub-19:00 performance under her belt, so I asked if she had revised her goals for the remainder of the year. She said she'd like to place in the top 10 at State and perhaps run a sub-18:40. With her 18:39 performance this past Saturday, it looks like Claire needs to find another goal.

I primarily cover Class A athletes – a byproduct of attending mostly Class A races the last seven years to watch my Creighton Prep sons compete – but I had the opportunity to attend the Skutt Invite on September 10. The two highlights of the meet may have been the team competition between Lincoln North Star and Creighton Prep team and the dominant performance by Omaha Skutt's Jaedan Bunda in the girls' race.

I've followed Jaedan's career from a distance, and have only seen her run at the UNK and State meets. Now a senior, Jaedan has had a strong career – 14 career XC medals in her first three years, and placing 3rd and 2nd, respectively, at Districts in her freshman and sophomore years. She ran two sub-20:00 races as a sophomore, but her State performances haven't reflected her talent, with finishes of 16th, 22nd and 63rd.

In contrast, Jaedan's senior season has been extraordinary thus far. She's won each of her three races, running 18:47 on a difficult Seward course, 19:18 to set a course record at Skutt, and 19:22 at Norfolk. She was pushed by Stella at the Seward meet, but she won the other two meets by over a minute. At an extremely windy UNK Invite this past Monday, she took an early lead and won in 19:33; Madison Seiler of Gering was eight seconds back.

During our discussion, I noted her improvement this year and asked what she's done to achieve those marks. When I ask boys this question, I usually hear, "I increased my mileage this summer" or "I didn't take three months off over the winter." Consequently, Jaedan's answer was a bit surprising. "It was all mental. I didn't enjoy running as much last year, and I didn't focus on my team as much as I should have. This year, I'm not focusing on times; I'm focusing on having fun and being a good teammate."

If you're skeptical that this is the reason she's running better, consider this. The Skutt girls' coaches don't follow a high-mileage program, and this summer Jaedan averaged 20-30 miles per week – running only on weekdays. Most of this was base mileage, although they would do two or three workouts each week. Her in-season mileage is right around 25-30 miles, and she takes off at least one day per week.

In addition to her new mental approach to running, Jaedan credits her overall happiness to a resurgence of her faith life. While this applies to her entire day, she feels that practicing her faith gives her a higher purpose to run and helps her find joy in the simple act of running. In short, she believes she's been given a talent, and running fast is an expression of the glory of God.

As for the future, Jaedan is hoping to earn her first State cross country medal this year. While she placed 8th in the 3200 at State track as a sophomore, a medal this fall would be validation that her new mentality is the best approach for her. She'd also like to see Skutt win State after finishing 2nd, 3rd and 2nd the past three years. They're currently ranked 4th behind Elkhorn, Duchesne and Seward.

She hopes to run in college and has a dream school in mind, but she's exploring multiple options to find the right fit for academics and athletics. After her up-and-down experiences the past four years, she has faith that her best times are ahead.

I haven't talked to Hannah Godwin, a senior at Kearney High, for sixteen months but she picked up the conversation like we were next door neighbors. We first spoke in May 2019 for a pre-State article (<https://www.nebraskaelitetc.org/single-post/2019/05/12/HannahG>) where Hannah discussed her softball career, running with her dog Gus, and her love of Oreos. (Quick update: Hannah has hung up her softball cleats, Gus is getting on in the years and doesn't run much anymore, and she still loves Oreos.)

At the time of our May 2019 interview, Hannah was six months past a 4th place finish at State cross country, and a few weeks away from a 2nd place finish in the State 1600 (5:06) and 7th in the 3200 (11:33). Unfortunately, Hannah's luck ran out.

Hannah had a stress fracture last fall and missed the first eight weeks of the season. She attributes the stress fracture to a new regimen of weightlifting – "to be honest, I'm not sure why I decided weightlifting was going to help me get better – it was probably a bad decision to dive into it so quickly." She returned in time for the HAC championships, qualified individually at Districts (9th in 20:37), and then finished 30th at State in 19:51. After 12th and 4th place finishes at State XC the first two years of her career, 30th place was certainly a disappointment. However, after State she continued a methodical

recovery that included aqua jogging, and she was 'so ready' for the spring track season before it was cancelled.

Hannah has been running about 35 miles per week since the spring. Even though she's healthy, she's continued to aqua jog for about 90 minutes per week. She is doing some body-weight strength training, but she isn't going anywhere near the squat bar the rest of her high school career.

This season is shaping up as the best of Hannah's career. She opened with a 19:22 at Cozad, then 18:43 on a flat Kearney course (Meadowlark Golf Course), and 19:15 at Pioneers' Park to finish six seconds behind Bri Rinn of Lincoln Southwest. Three of her last four races this season will be at the Kearney Country Club, and she ran 19:19 to win the UNK Invite Class A race this Monday. Her goal is to win State and break the Kearney High State record of 19:13. She would also like to break 18:30 this season, although it may be difficult based on the courses remaining on her schedule. Kearney is currently ranked 7th in the Class A rankings and appears to have a good chance to qualify for State.

During our May 2019, Hannah had good advice for young runners. I asked the same question again last week since she's had a few setbacks in the past year. She responded:

- You get better when things are tough. Work hard even when there is no glory.
- Trust in and be patient with the recovery process after an injury.
- Running is supposed to be fun. Don't stress out about it.
- Ten years from now you'll remember the memories you made with your teammates, but you won't remember the times and rankings.
- Improvements take time. Shortcuts lead to injuries.

Like all other seniors, Hannah is trying to navigate the college selection process in the midst of a pandemic. She's talking to a few D1 schools but is open to competing at any level. She's leaning towards a science major with the hopes of pursuing a career in healthcare. She isn't opposed to going far away to school, but she would also be happy to stay in Nebraska. As we discussed her college hunt, she seemed to be practicing her own advice: "Picking a college is supposed to be fun; don't stress about it."

Kaylie Crews, a senior at Papillion South High School, has been a model of consistency in her high school cross country career. She's finished 7th, 1st and 3rd at the State meet her first three years, with 1.5 seconds separating Elli Dahl (Fremont), Berlyn Schutz (Lincoln East) and Kaylie at last year's epic race. The 5k distance suits Kaylie much more than the 1600 (5:19 PR) and 3200 (11:07 PR), and she expects to run the 5000 and 10000 on the track in college. Kaylie is the first high-profile Nebraska runner to commit this fall; she announced two weeks ago that she'll be attending Alabama. (We first wrote about Kaylie in a May 2019 article: <https://www.nebraskaelitetc.org/single-post/2019/05/13/PapioS>)

This fall Kaylie has raced four times, breaking 19:00 twice. She opened the season by gapping the field early and running 19:17 at the Westside meet. She ran a relatively pedestrian 20:01 at a triangular with

Lincoln East and Lincoln Southwest; the coaches compared notes at the mile mark and realized that all three of them had told their runners to avoid taking the lead. She ran shoulder-to-shoulder with Stella Miner and Claire White at Walnut Creek before finishing 3rd in 19:03, and this past Saturday she blazed to a 18:17 on a table-flat Fremont course.

Although she's a senior, Kaylie still tries to learn something from every race. After the Walnut Creek race, she realized that she was overthinking race strategy. She realized she runs best when she doesn't worry about the outcome, but instead focuses on putting in the work during practice. She's also realized that the reason she runs is to be social – whether with her teammates every day or with competitors at races – and she's trying to put more emphasis on this as her high school career winds down.

However, this doesn't mean that Kaylie has stopped setting goals. She likes to set big goals, and she's headstrong on breaking the 18:00 mark this year. She'd also like to win State this year; last year's 3rd place finish has made her 'a little hungry.'

Papio South has a young team with relatively little varsity experience, and the reduced meet schedule hasn't helped that situation. However, the team realizes that what they need most is confidence, so their team motto this year is, "Turn your swag on." Kaylie, the wizened old veteran, can already see that her younger teammates are growing in confidence as they realize how successful they can be.

The NCAA has extended the recruiting dead period for Division 1 through December 31 (a decision that even D1 coaches don't understand), so I asked Kaylie how she was able to pick a college without meeting the coach in person. She said that she had been talking with Alabama's Coach Palmer by phone and Zoom for quite a while, and she felt that he takes the same approach that Coach Jeremy Haselhorst uses for his Papio South team. In addition, Coach Palmer is trying to build up the Alabama program by focusing on culture – putting an emphasis on recruiting well-rounded, academically-strong young women who are kind to both teammates and competitors. I'm sure Coach Haselhorst gave a great recommendation to Coach Palmer; he told me that Kaylie "is a rare combination of talent, passion for running, love for the team and teammates, and most importantly a great person."

Alabama was the only campus that Kaylie has visited since last spring. A few weeks ago Kaylie and her dad visited Alabama for an academic-only visit, and she was able to get a glimpse of the athletic facilities and meet several current runners. If not for COVID, she agreed that she may have taken several official visits, but that visit and her talks with Coach Palmer convinced her that Alabama was a perfect fit for her.

As is often the case, the Class A girls' field is thick with high-level competitors. In addition to these five athletes, we also expect Bri Rinn (LSW) and any number of runners from Lincoln East and Fremont will be in the hunt for a State title. It's certainly a golden time for Nebraska distance running.

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