

Seth Hirsch, Senior, Millard West High School

In the moment, a 4th grade soccer game can seem pretty important. However, as the years pass, the fine details of games – and perhaps even entire seasons – are forgotten. What about the games that were scheduled but cancelled on short notice? Surely no one gives a second thought about those games, especially after eight years have gone by.

But Seth Hirsch remembers that cancelled game, because this is how fate works: if a 4th-grade select soccer game hadn't been cancelled in the fall of 2008 – and if his older sister hadn't decided that running was her favorite sport, then he wouldn't have tagged along to Sidney's USATF cross country meet in Lincoln. If he hadn't tagged along, his parents wouldn't have paid the \$5 for Seth's first race. If Seth hadn't won the 3K race that day, it's entirely possible that Nebraska would have been deprived of the best cross country runner in state history.

Early success

Seth won his first cross country race solely on the strength of his soccer conditioning; before his first race, he had never run outside of soccer or basketball practice. However, he immediately recognized that if he trained for races, he could make his mark. He began running with sister Sidney, now a senior on the Wichita State team, and joined the Omaha Racers track club. He finished his 4th grade season by finishing 2nd at the Junior Olympic national meet in Greensboro, NC. He improved on those results by winning the 3000 and placing 3rd in the 1500 at the national meet at the end of 6th grade, and he repeated those placings two years later.

Despite that success, Seth continued to prefer soccer and basketball over running. He played on OFC and Arsenal select soccer teams and on school-based basketball teams, despite repeated kidding by Max Kurz – then the XC coach at Millard West – that he should hang up his soccer cleats. Seth recalls that in 8th grade he would occasionally have cross country, soccer and basketball practices on the same day. He dropped basketball after 8th grade and soccer after 9th grade to focus on running.

Coaching influences

Seth credits a series of strong coaches for helping him develop his running. Leigh Officer was his coach through the Omaha Racers, and he ran for Scott Haug in cross country and track at Russell Middle School. Max Kurz led the Millard West distance programs from 1995 through 2015, and Colin Johnston is in his second year as Millard West's head distance coach after eight years as an assistant.

Since Coach Johnston coaches both cross country and track, he is able to provide year-round guidance to Seth. Coach Johnston quickly observes that Seth's work ethic makes him such a special runner: "Nobody outworks him, and he has spent every day of the last four years trying to be the best he can be." Coach Johnston has a very consistent training approach, and he believes that his most dedicated upperclassmen could probably coach themselves after two years in the Millard West system. He has some training components that are non-negotiable parts of training, but a few days each week he gives his best runners the freedom to pick their workouts. One of his non-negotiable workouts is hill repeats, which Seth hates, but Coach Johnston insists on them because they make Seth and every other runner better.

While there are many positives to having one of the best runners in the country on his team, Coach Johnston is also challenged to make sure he's keeping current on developments in sports science. Seth is a rare athlete, and Coach Johnston's first priority is to keep him healthy, which often means advising Seth to run less. Seth and Coach Johnston review mileage levels at least weekly, and Coach Johnston watches for early signs of fatigue and injury. He believes that Seth has played the biggest role in staying injury free the past eighteen months, in part by replacing miles with low-impact cross training.

Coach Johnston believes that consistent year-round training, except for after-season breaks, is the best way to realize gradual performance improvements. He considers Millard West to be more of a strength program than a speed program; they rarely run intervals below 1000 meters during the cross country season, but instead focus on a weekly long run, tempo runs of up to 6 miles, hill repeats and intervals between 1000 and 2000 meters. His best performers are running 40-60 miles per week off-season and 40-50 miles in-season.

Training summary

Seth is quick to note that 'staying healthy' is his biggest challenge with running. He lost virtually his entire sophomore year to injury, first with a stress fracture in his right fibula during the first week of cross country, and then a stress fracture in his left fibula on the first day of track workouts. He was able to compete at the state meet during both seasons, but those were two of only a handful of races that entire year.

That difficult year led to changes in how Seth trains. He averaged approximately 20 miles per week in 6th grade, 50 miles per week in 8th grade, and up to 85 miles per week during his freshman year. His stress fractures resulted from a combination of high mileage and a tendency for his footfall to place great force on the outsides of his feet. He has slightly changed his footfall, added exercises to strengthen his feet, and cut back his mileage to 70-75 miles per week.

Seth's current training approach has paid huge dividends, but it's one that few high schoolers could replicate. The majority of his weekly miles are run at a 5:40 or 5:45 pace, even when he runs long. For example, the national running website MileSplit posted his weekly training log for July 18, 2016. Of his total of 74 miles, 58 miles were at a 5:45 or lower pace, including a 12-mile run and one day where he had two runs at the same high speed.

Seth considers on-the-track intervals to be a high-risk venture given his injury history, so he limits his speed work to tempo runs and striders until midway through the track season. His favorite workout is a 6-mile tempo run. His most difficult workouts are 'off-the-clock-400's,' where Coach Johnston puts up a large clock on the track infield. Every two minutes the Millard West runners start a 400-meter repeat, and after completion they get to rest until that two-minute period is complete. A set of 12 reps takes just over 23 minutes, and Coach Johnston makes the workout tougher by asking the team to 'hammer' the 8th, 10th and 12th reps.

On average, Seth works out twice a day. During off-season training, he'll typically run twice three days per week. On the other four days, his second workout is either on a recumbent bike, elliptical or stair

climber. He doesn't have a strength-training routine but expects to begin one in college. Seth also doesn't tailor his nutrition plan to his running career, but he knows he'll need to do so in college.

Race times and highlights

Seth has rewritten Nebraska's cross country record book the past year, but he's been a dominant force for four years. As a freshman, his PR was 15:37 at Walnut Grove and he finished second at State in 15:45 behind Wyatt McGuire of North Platte. His only race during his sophomore season was 17th place at State in 17:03. He rebounded in his junior year, winning State in 15:29, scorching a 15:03 at Nike Regionals, and then placing ninth at both Nike Nationals and Footlocker Nationals. As a senior, he became the first Nebraskan to break the 15:00 mark during the season, running a 14:56 at Walnut Grove. He won State in 15:04, placed second in 14:39 at Nike Regionals, 4th at Nike Nationals and 3rd at Footlocker Nationals. Seth is the first and only Nebraskan to medal at either national meet. He finally up his cross country season on January 7th when he represented Team USA in the Great Edinburgh Cross Country Challenge in Scotland.

Seth's favorite high school race distance is the 5k, although he reckons to be a force in the 3200 this spring. In terms of the State, he's placed 13th in the 1600 as a freshman, did not run the event as a sophomore, and was 13th in 4:28 as a junior. His PR came at the Nike Elite Distance Camp in July, when he posted a 4:21 mile during an exhibition race at the Olympic Trials in Eugene.

He's had far more success in the 3200, finishing 2nd at State in 9:22 as a freshman, a surprisingly strong 3rd in 9:24 at the end of his injury-plagued sophomore season, and 2nd in 9:15 during his junior year. During a November 2016 3200-meter time trial in the lead-up to Nike Regionals, Seth and Milo Greder both ran 8:59. The state record of 8:55 (2004) is currently held by Colby Wissel of Kearney, and the State meet record of 9:08 (1977) is held by Paul Schultz of Burke. Many observers believe that Seth and Milo Greder will eclipse both 3200 records during the upcoming track season. Seth also hopes to drop below 4:15 in the 1600 this season, and he's hoping he has the chance to run an on-track 5,000 in the 14:20s this March. Seth and Milo Greder both have a goal of running at the Arcadia (CA) Invitational in April, which requires them to be one of the fastest 18 runners in the entry pool. They have until March 25th to improve upon their career-best times to increase their chances of being invited to the invitational.

No motivation needed

Even the best runners will confide that they aren't always motivated, but Seth reports no such problem. Ever since winning his first race in 4th grade, he knew he could compete well if he put in the time and effort. He enjoys running because a person doesn't have to be an athletic freak to be successful. He hasn't experienced any monumental jumps in performance; he feels his success the past two seasons have been the result of consistent miles dating back to elementary school.

Seth notes that his parents and sister Sidney have been exceptionally supportive, although they have not had to push him in any way. This past summer, his dad drove 34 hours over a weekend when Seth received a late invitation to run the 5,000 at the New Balance Nationals.

During XC and track seasons, Seth runs the same workouts as his teammates but typically runs alone except on interval days and recovery runs. The Millard West program has some amazing runners, but few can match Seth's long-distance pace. Millard West has won the last two State cross country titles and is the defending champion in track, and Seth gushes about the camaraderie of his team. Coach Johnston appears to have an endless supply of talented and fun-loving distance runners, and they have a great chance to repeat as track champions.

College plans and advice

Given his success on the national stage, Seth had few limits in deciding where he would attend college. His four finalists were Wisconsin, Stanford, Furman and Georgetown. In November he committed to Wisconsin, primarily because of its strong focus on distance running, the high caliber of recent recruiting classes, and the reputation of its business school. When asked what other runners should consider when selecting a college, he was emphatic that – all other things being equal – go with the school that wants you the most.

At this author's request, Seth provided training advice for underclassmen that reflects his work ethic but is more aggressive than the philosophy of most high school coaches. He feels that runners only get better through hard work and high mileage. Since the majority of runners are only going to run competitively during the eight years of high school and college, he thinks that low mileage in high school can be a pitfall. Of course, the key to a high-mileage program is avoiding injuries, and Seth seems to have found the approach that does that. Competitive runners at all levels struggle with how to avoid injury while finding their maximum training levels, and Seth may be especially unique in how he responds to high-mileage training.

Looking ahead

Seth Hirsch has had an amazing prep career on the state, national and international levels, and he should continue to excel at Wisconsin. Despite all of his accomplishments, the one goal that has eluded him is an individual State title in track and field. If Seth and Milo continue to run well this spring, track fans may want to plan ahead to attend the Friday morning session at the State track meet. The 3200 may be an epic race, thanks in part to a soccer game eight years ago that was never played.

Jay Slagle is a volunteer writer for the Nebraska Elite TC website. The father of three teenagers, he's a self-professed running nerd who was never any good at running. He has written two children's books available for sale on Amazon. Visit www.jayslagle.com for more information.