

Taya Skelton, Sophomore, Ft. Calhoun High School

In an era of specialization, Taya Skelton has thus far refused to be defined by one sport. The sophomore at Ft. Calhoun won the Class C State cross country meet in 2015 and 2016. She was the starting shooting guard for a team that fell one win short of the 2017 State tourney, and she plays on a travel team each summer. She played club soccer until high school, junior high volleyball, and softball through 6th grade. Outside of sports, she is active in show choir, drama, choir and four or five other groups inside and outside of school. Indeed, Taya's activity list is a textbook example of the benefits of attending one of Nebraska's smaller schools – why specialize when your only limit is the number of hours in a day?

Girl on the run

Taya's running career began in 3rd grade, when she took part in the Girls on the Run program at her Ft. Calhoun elementary school. While the program didn't focus on mileage – Taya described it as 'running a mile every now and then, with a 5k at the end of two months' – it gave Taya confidence and a love for running. She began running more in junior high, ending each cross country season at the Nebraska Junior High State Championships, where she finished seventh in 7th grade and fourth in 8th grade. Racing came easy to Taya, and her coach Jim Meyers recalls her winning nearly all of her cross country races during those two years.

Junior high track was less memorable for Taya – she can only remember one PR, a 2:36 800 she ran in 8th grade – but that's understandable given that she was still played club soccer, basketball and volleyball during those years.

Coach Meyer, Ft. Calhoun High School's head cross country coach and assistant track coach, was also Taya's 7th grade cross country coach, so he knew she would make an impact during her freshman year. Ft. Calhoun competes in Class C for cross country but Class B for track and field. After a 5th place finish in her first high school race, Taya finished 1st or 2nd in her remaining cross country races in 9th grade, culminating with a 6-second win at State over Zoe Ritz of Ord. She dropped her time over the course of the season by nearly one minute, setting a PR of 19:55 at State.

Taya had a successful freshman track season despite competing in Class B. She lowered her 800 PR to 2:30 and set PRs at State in the 1600 (5:26, 7th place) and 3200 (11:45, 5th place).

This past fall she won all but one cross country race, finishing second to Mazie Larsen at the Plattsmouth Invite. Ft. Calhoun ran several new courses in 2016, but Coach Meyer felt that Taya improved her times by 30-45 seconds over the prior year. However, three days before Districts, Taya felt a sharp pain in her right Achilles, and her doctor suggested that she consider ending her season. However, the Ft. Calhoun team had an excellent chance to win State, and Taya was too much of a competitor to walk away. Taya did not run during the three days before Districts and, despite promising Coach Meyer that she'd run easy, she still ran a 19:50 at Boystown. She continued to rest her Achilles for the next eight days, opting mostly for biking and the elliptical instead of running. Despite the lack of mileage, she won the Class C race for a second time, finishing with a PR and a Class C State meet record of 19:34. The next day, she began a four-week stint in a walking boot.

Why run?

High school runners cite a wide variety of reasons why they love to run, and Taya's reasons mostly relate to relationships. When she joined cross country in 7th grade, she established new friendships. While she thrives on competition – in any sport – she most enjoys the closeness and familiarity among her teammates. Coach Meyer devotes considerable effort each year to creating a cross country 'family,' and not just among the girls on his team. He wants his male and female runners, their parents, their siblings and past runners to be part of this family. The team eats dinner together the day before each race, and a large number of alumni return for Ft. Calhoun's home meet.

Coach Meyer's focus on teamwork appears to be working. Taya reports that the highlight of the cross country season was the night before the 2016 State meet. On the night before the meeting, the Ft. Calhoun athletes dressed up in their best onesie pajamas with feet, and they engaged in a full-out Nerf gun war in the hallways of their Kearney hotel. Awards were given for the best and worst onesie. The Ft. Calhoun girls' team finished second at State, just 3 points behind Columbus Scotus, and 4 of their 6 runners at State were underclassmen.

In addition to the camaraderie developed with teammates, Taya appreciates the chance to meet other runners. Last fall she attended the Nebraska Elite weekend camp – in a walking boot – where she was able to spend time with Taylor Somers (1st in Class A) of Millard South, Mazie Larsen (1st in Class B) of Gretna, and Cameron Hucke (2nd in Class D) of Hastings St. Cecilia. This summer she'll be attending the two-week Nebraska Elite camp in Colorado, and she hopes to make new friends there.

Coaching perspective

Coach Meyer has been a teacher at Ft. Calhoun for 38 years, and this past year was his 35th as the head cross country coach. He is retiring this May, but he will continue to volunteer for both the cross country and track programs. Taya is his second state champion; Shannon Ramey won the Class C title in 2011. He reports that Taya is exceptionally easy to coach. She pushes herself in workouts and races, to the point that he has to emphasize when he wants her to run easy. His coaching philosophy is to help his runners exhibit steady improvements each year, and that's all he expects from Taya over the next two years. When pressed, he won't guess what Taya's best efforts could be during high school.

Coach Meyer runs a relatively low-mileage program, but he prefers frequent racing to sharpen fitness. In addition to playing on a traveling basketball team all of last summer, Taya ran an average of 25-30 miles, and she went to the weight room after her morning run as often as four days per week. Taya rarely runs during the winter basketball season, primarily due to a lack of time. During the season, she averages around 30 miles while running six days a week. Coach Meyer limits Taya to 4-5 miles on her long days, and he incorporates a mix of interval training, including 800-meter repeats and alternating hard/easy 200s. Saturdays during the fall are reserved for 3 x 1600 workouts, which allows Coach Meyer to gauge an athlete's improvement throughout the season. Coach Meyer often drives alongside his runners, and he will check their progress at the one-mile mark to see if they are being honest about their pace.

Taya gets her share of cross-training through basketball, but the Ft. Calhoun team will perform an abdominal routine after summer runs. A Ft. Calhoun opens the weight room four days per week during the summer for all Pioneer athletes, and the Taya's workouts are often focused on arms, legs or speed and agility.

Race day and goals

With only three high school racing seasons under her belt, Taya feels that her best times are ahead of her. She finds the first mile of a cross country race to be the most difficult for her, but she relaxes once she's found the right pace. Taya loves fruit snacks but typically only eats them on race day, when she eats far too many of them. At cross country races, the Ft. Calhoun girls have created a tradition of touching a lucky spot on teammate Mandy Hansen's jersey – in 2015, it was a bleach spot, but the team had to improvise when they received new uniforms for the 2016 season. Taya prefers the Kearney course, where she races twice each season, as well as Ft. Calhoun's home course at Ft. Atkinson. Her favorite racing distance is the 2-mile run in track, but she loves to race at any distance.

Taya's mom plays a role in keeping Taya on track in terms of training. She stays current on Taya's workout splits and she makes sure that Taya makes time for her daily run. While Mrs. Skelton is supportive and loud at races, she pales in comparison to the 'Screaming Grandpa' that attends most of Ft. Calhoun's meets.

In terms of goals for this track season, Taya is simply hoping to set new PRs in her three events. She owns the school record in all distance races, and she would like to drop under 2:20, 5:20, 11:30 and 19:00 before she graduates. As much success as she's had, she feels that she hasn't devoted her full efforts to being a runner, and she's reducing her basketball commitment this summer to allow time for the Nebraska Elite camp and potentially some post-State track events. Her primary goal is for the Ft. Calhoun team to win State next fall. Avery McKennan, also a sophomore, finished 7th at State in 2016, and freshmen Kelsie Premer and Kyla DeLuca will also be returning.

Taya hasn't thought much about her running career beyond high school. She's interested in becoming a pediatrician or something else in the medical field, and both UNL and UNO are possible destinations.

Five more seasons

During Taya's increasingly rare spare time, she enjoys reading, painting and writing. She has two State championships, but the next few chapters of her running career hold even more promise. A four-time Class C State champion? Making her mark in Class B track and field? Running competitively in college? We can't predict where she'll go from here, but we know one thing for sure; with her schedule, she'll always be on the move.

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.