

Molly Paxton, Senior, Mullen High School

Do you love running? Enough to stand in front of the school board, putting your family's hard-earned reputation on the line, to ask that the school re-instate a sport that's been dormant for over 30 years? Does your dad love running enough that he, despite working than full time as a cattle rancher, would volunteer to be your coach? Does your school board care enough about its students that it's willing to add a sport that might only attract one athlete?

So goes the story of Molly Paxton of Mullen. During winter of her sophomore year, she made an appeal to the school board to add a cross country program. With seemingly little hesitation, the school board said 'yes,' and the Mullen cross country team began making history.

Molly is a multi-sport athlete, but not in the typical manner. She's a distance runner, a guard on the basketball team, a volleyball player through sophomore year... and a rodeo competitor. Since she was eight years old, Molly has competed in barrel racing, which entails riding a half-ton horse in a cloverleaf pattern around barrels – as fast as possible. Competitions often consist of one go-round on two consecutive days, and the rider with the fastest average time is declared the winner. Molly's time is usually less than 19 seconds in a sport where the margins are so slim that times are measured to the thousands of a second.

Mullen has a population of just over 500 and is located about 70 miles north of North Platte. Tucked in the middle of the Sandhills, it's less than a three-hour drive from Mullen to South Dakota, Wyoming or Colorado. With a town roughly the size of 10 blocks by 10 blocks, most training runs include at least a few miles on country roads. Molly lives on a cattle ranch twenty-seven miles outside of Mullen, so much of her offseason training is on gravel roads.

Despite working on a ranch and participating in multiple sports, Molly considers distance running to be the only athletic endeavor in which she has talent. She fell in love with running in 7th grade, her first track season, and ran a 6:36 1600 in her debut. After an acquaintance suggested that Molly would never beat one of her teammates, Molly dug in and ran a 6:06 by the end of 8th grade.

With no cross country team, Molly focused primarily on rodeo during the fall of her freshman and sophomore years. By the middle of her sophomore track season, she was frustrated by her lack of improvement. While competitors from other towns with cross country programs continued to get faster, Molly's gains were less significant. She placed 11th at State in the 3200 as both a freshman sophomore (as well as 9th in the 1600 as a sophomore), but that fell short of her expectations, which is how she found herself standing in front of the school board.

As luck would have it, Mullen Public Schools hired a new superintendent shortly after the school board approved the cross country program. The superintendent's wife is Janie Kuncl, a paraprofessional who previously started the cross country program at Riverside in Cedar Rapids, Nebraska. Janie was thrilled for the opportunity to coach an athlete with so much passion for running, and there was an additional bonus – Janie would be able to coach her freshman son Trevor.

In the fall of 2018, the re-booted version of the Mullen cross country program featured two boys – Trevor Kuncl and Hayden Jennings – and Molly. Despite having a sore hip mid-season, Molly placed 8th at Districts to qualify for State – and then she placed 8th at State. Trevor also qualified for State, and the duo were Mullen’s first two State cross country qualifiers in over 50 years. Molly also became the first Mullen athlete to ever medal at the State cross country meet.

As Molly had hoped, the cross country season served as a springboard for track season. She improved significantly in the last month of her junior season, finishing with a State gold medal in the 3200 in 12:02 and a silver medal in the 1600 in 5:33. Both were PRs by a wide margin. Although Molly had been the District champion in both races, she was “insanely surprised” by her 10-second win in the 3200.

Running is a family affair for the Paxtons. Molly’s dad Dusty finished 2nd in State in the 3200 in 1992 while competing for McPherson County. Older sister Aubrea was a solid middle-distance runner, freshman brother Eli will likely run the 400 and 800 during track, and younger sister Peyton is excelling in 7th grade cross country. A strong work ethic is a crucial attribute in both distance running and ranching, which may explain some of the family’s success.

With the high school rodeo season spanning from the spring through November, Molly’s summer schedule is busy. She tried to lift at school four times per week during the summer – at 6:00 a.m. sessions – and run 15-20 miles per week. During the season, she runs about 25 miles per week. Her favorite workouts are mile repeats; her least favorite are hill workouts. This fall, the high school squad has expanded to four runners, although Molly remains the only girl. The boys are a bit too fast to train with her, but she has training partners during track season including Brook McCully, who finished 7th at State in the 1600 last spring.

Outside of athletics, Molly is the current Nebraska High School Rodeo Association queen. In July, she represented Nebraska at the National High School Finals Rodeo Queen contest in Rock Springs, Wyoming, placing 4th overall out of 42 girls while winning the Impromptu Questions and Appearance portions of the competition. In her role, she is often the flag bearer at Nebraska high school rodeos, and she’s expected to advocate for the sport of rodeo and the western way of life. She was a state officer for the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America during the 2018/19 school year. She has her share of chores at the family ranch, although she quickly admits that her freshman brother does more work there.

Molly expects to attend UNL next fall, majoring in biology and/or pre-med. As of now, she has no plans to compete in college, but she’s keeping her options open.

As this season winds down, Molly continues to see improvement. She placed 8th at the UNK Invite, improved her time at the Bayard meet by 37 seconds, and seems well-prepared for this week’s District meet. Her goal at the start of the season was to win the conference meet, break 20:00 and place in the

top three at State. She captured the conference title last week and, after surprising finishes at her last two State meets, the other two goals also seem within reach.

Jay Slagle is a volunteer writer for the Nebraska Elite TC website www.nebraskaelitetc.org. He posts Nebraska high school race pictures at www.facebook.com/preprunningnerd and race results at @preprunningnerd on Twitter. The father of three teenagers, Jay is a self-professed running nerd who was never good at running. His article about Noah Lambrecht, The Runner with the Broken Heart, has been viewed over 200,000 times and is available at <https://www.nebraskaelitetc.org/single-post/2018/10/07/NoahLambrecht>. He's a sucker for a good story, so e-mail him at jay@jayslagle.com if you've got one. He has written two children's books available for sale on Amazon. Visit www.jayslagle.com for more information.