

Mazie Larsen, Junior, Gretna High School (published December 2016)

It shouldn't surprise you that Gretna's Mazie Larsen quickly names the Kearney Country Club as her favorite cross country course. In October 2015, senior Erin Lee from York was a strong favorite to win the Class B title, and with good reason; Erin captured 11 individual track and XC state titles before moving onto Kansas State. However, Mazie stuck with Erin through 2.5 miles and then used a strong final kick to win the title by 12 seconds in 18:44, a 33-second PR.

As a junior in 2016, Mazie entered the state meet as the top-ranked Class B runner. After watching Alliance's Rylee Rice win the Class D title in 18:34, Mazie won the Class B title with another PR of 18:32. The Class A race began while Mazie was at the UNK Fieldhouse for the Class B medal ceremony. Mazie's mom stayed at the course to send text updates of the Class A race, but her mom's phone died before the race ended. After a few anxious minutes, congratulatory texts finally began arriving on Mazie's phone; she had won the All-Class gold medal.

An early start

Mazie's running career began early. Her family lives in the country outside of Gretna, and the school bus dropped off Mazie at the end of a 0.4 mile driveway. The bus rides were awfully long for her six-year-old bladder, so Mazie began to run the driveway every afternoon to reach the bathroom more quickly. Maureen Larsen decided that her daughter had some natural talent, so she registered Mazie for the Omaha Racers, an USATF track club based in west Omaha. After Mazie finished last by '5 or 10 seconds' in her first 100-meter race, Racers coach Leigh Officer brilliantly suggested that Mazie might find more enjoyment in longer races. Mazie continues to run the summer track season with the Racers, and she's now helping to mentor younger runners in the club.

Mazie owes at least some of athletic success to her parents. Both Tim and Maureen are runners, and Maureen has had a particularly accomplished adult career. Maureen ran in high school, but she became more serious about running after Mazie and her older sister were born. Maureen won the 2001 and 2005 Omaha Marathon, and this past March she won the master's division of the Lincoln State Farm 10-mile race in a blazing 1:07:34.

Mazie enjoys running because it is an 'escape' for her, it's something that not everyone can do well, and it's allowed her to forge special relationships. Like many area runners, she's developed friendships with competitors from other schools, and she noted that Millard South's Taylor Somers has been a great friend and role model.

Mileage and workouts

In addition to inheriting her mother's talent and motivation for running, it's fairly clear that Maureen was the first of a series of talented coaches that have helped Mazie develop as a runner. Mazie doesn't hesitate when asked to list coaches who have helped her, including Leigh Officer and Mark Wittland of the Omaha Racers, as well as Spencer Stednitz and Bryce Brunswig of Gretna High School. In addition, Mazie has utilized Andrew Middleton of McMillan Running and Dave Ramsey from the Brokaw Blazers to develop personalized workout plans.

Mazie typically runs six days per week during the off-season. She averaged about 35 miles per week during summer running, and she expects to run an average of 30 miles in winter running. Both represent a 10-mile increase from the previous year. Once the season starts, she adds quite a bit of speedwork. During cross country season, her most difficult workouts were 10x400 or 5x800 intervals, although she'd occasionally work up to a dozen repeats. She runs 'flying 150's' and 'flying 300's' – intervals with a running start – to increase her leg turnover and top-level speed. Her favorite workouts are 400 repeats; her least favorite are tempo runs. She trains through the meets in the first half of the season before she begins tapering for later races.

Coach Brunswig has introduced ab/core work and limited off-season strength training for the Gretna team, and Mazie also does core workouts at home. She does not do any other strength-training or cross-training at this time. She does not follow a nutrition plan devoted to running, although her mother tries to cook healthy meals. Mazie admits that she'll eat any fast food she sees, so Maureen does her best to keep it out of the house.

Off the track

Mazie has two siblings; Kate attends college at KU while Caleb is eight. Mazie is responsible for getting Caleb out of bed, fed and off to school every morning. She's a class officer and is active in the Gretna FBLA, Spanish Club, Service Club and the National Honor Society. She played soccer through 8th grade and tried basketball in 3rd grade, but she described her play as 'horrible.'

PRs and race day approach

Despite her early start to running, Mazie has continued to make significant improvements during her high school career. Her 5k XC PR has improved from 20:04 as freshman (9th at State) to 18:44 as a sophomore and 18:32 as a junior. Her best freshman times in track were 5:22 and 11:31, respectively, and she placed 5th and 3rd at the state meet. She improved her times to 5:11 and 11:17 as a sophomore, finishing second to Erin Lee at the state meet. She would like to break 5:00 and 11:00 this track season, but she knows both marks will be a challenge. Cross country is her favorite race, and she prefers hilly courses over flat ones, since much of her training is on the hills outside of Gretna.

Not all runners are superstitious, but Mazie has her share of 'traditions.' The night before a big race, she wears her entire racing uniform to bed, and she has her hair double-braided the day of the race. For the state XC race this past October, her friend Lauren Holke drove from Gretna to Kearney to braid Mazie's hair prior to the race. Mazie's race day meals include two English muffins for breakfast and an Uncrustable PB&J for lunch.

Mazie finds the middle of a race the most difficult – she gets bored and has to make an effort to stay focused on the task at hand. While she's had considerable success, Mazie still thinks she needs to improve her ability to run through discomfort during races. Her Gretna coaches are typically low-key during races, while her mother tends to 'go a little crazy.' Mazie feels that she runs better when she smiles, so Maureen reminds her to do that during races.

Coaching feedback

Coach Brunswig was a middle distance sprinter and hurdler at North Dakota State, but he is now a convert to distance running. He coached at Bellevue East for four years, and this was his first year of coaching at Gretna. He loosely follows the Lydiard school of training, coupling ample base mileage in the off-season with a gradual increase towards high-quality mileage as the season progresses. When he has runners of similar talent, he'll have them occasionally simulate pack racing during tempo runs and intervals. He tries to develop the mental aspects of his runners, with an emphasis on the brick-by-brick approach needed to achieve long-term success.

Coach Brunswig observed that Mazie has become a top performer because she combines talent with uncommon dedication and a commitment to the little things that make her better. Mazie often has to run alone in intervals and tempo runs, so she has to push herself. Her coach feels her most impressive aspect may be her positivity; she's a tremendous supporter of her teammates.

Looking ahead

In addition to improving her track times and defending her state XC title, Mazie would like to run in regional track and XC meets over the next 18 months to test her mettle against runners from other states.

Although she's just a junior, she has begun to think about running in college. Her sister attends KU and her dad graduated from there, so she lists Kansas and Wichita State as possible destinations. She'd like to earn an exercise science degree, with the long-term goal of becoming an orthopedic surgeon. With a full year remaining before she can commit to a college program, her options may widen as she continues to lower her PRs.

Despite all of Mazie's success, she remains remarkably humble. If she isn't, little brother Caleb will put her in place. At age 6, Caleb won the AAU cross country national championships held in Lawrence, Kansas. While two state championships might be pretty impressive to most people, Caleb is quick to remind Mazie that she's got a long way to go before she's a national champion.

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.