

Five Fast Boys (published 9/26/20)

As we reach the midpoint of the 2020 cross country season, Athletic.net reflects that four Class A boys have run sub-16:00 races thus far this year. That's an improvement over the first four week of 2019, when the only sub-16:00 races prior to State were Tyler Boyle at Walnut Grove and Thomas Oliver at the HAC meet in Kearney. In the past week, I've reached out to the boys with the five fastest times in Class A thus far to see how their season is progressing and their goals for the remainder of the season.

Daniel Romary (pronounced 'rah-muh-ree') is a junior at Lincoln Northeast. He's flown under the radar in the distance running world, in part because he's never been able to run a high school track season. He lost his entire freshman track season to injury and his sophomore season to COVID. However, he has been active in the USATF track scene since 7th grade, first competing as a sprinter before moving to middle distance as an 8th grader. In the summer after 8th grade, he posted bests of 52.2 in the 400 and 1:59.98 in the 800. After 9th grade, he ran 51.7 and 1:55.4 at USATF nationals, with a 3rd place in the 800. I first saw him run at the Concordia indoor meets in the February of his freshman year when he ran 52.7 and 2:00.7. The man can move.

While Daniel hasn't made as much noise on the cross country course, he's had a successful career thus far. As a freshman, he ran a season-best 16:59 at the LPS championships, placed 8th at Districts and finished 29th at State. As a sophomore, he dropped his PR to 16:45 at the Kearney High meet, finished 10th at Districts, and placed 62nd at State. The State performance was not as good as expected; he twisted his ankle two days prior to State while playing basketball in his bare feet. Coach John Snoozy may not have been pleased.

This season he's seen some strong improvement, highlighted by the 16:05 mark at the Kearney High meet on September 11. Juan Garcia of Grand Island and Evan Caudy of North Platte were also in the race, and it may have been the best race thus far this year. Juan took a lead at 3k followed closely by Evan and then Daniel. Daniel kicked at 800 to pass Evan, Evan responded by sprinting the last 400, and Evan then passed Juan with about 200 to go to win by just a second. Daniel couldn't maintain his kick for the entire 800, but he took home a third-place medal and a good lesson on race strategy.

Daniel also faced tough competition at the Harold Scott Invite on September 17. Running in the afternoon division, he led Drew Snyder of Lincoln Southwest for much of the race before finishing second in 16:35. With the divisions combined, he took 4th place behind Gabe Hinrichs of Elkhorn South, Sam Kirchner of Millard West, and Drew. Once again, while he didn't win, he took away a few lessons on race strategy.

Daniel has seen strong improvements since last year, in part because he spent the summer training for a 5K season instead of preparing for 400- and 800-meter USATF summer races. He averaged about 30 miles per week this summer compared to 20 in previous summers, and in-season he's running 35-40 miles per week. He did spend a few weeks this summer focusing on his own 1600 time trial, and he ran a solo 4:16 on July 30.

Daniel's first goal for this season is to help his team qualify for State. He thinks they have a good opportunity, in part because Coach Snoozy is able to individualize his approach for each of his runners. For Daniel, he's figured out that whenever Daniel sets a time goal for a race or a workout, Coach Snoozy assures Daniel that the goal just might be a bit too aggressive for Daniel to reach. While Daniel knows the routine by now, he's so competitive that he always sets out to prove his coach wrong.

From an individual perspective, Daniel would like to break the school record of 15:53 set at Pioneers' Park by Wyatt McLeod and he'd like to finish in the top 5 at State. It seems possible given all the lessons he's learned along the way, and he's certain he'll follow one strategy for the State meet: he is definitely not playing barefoot basketball in October.

Juan Garcia of Grand Island placed 8th at State cross country in 2019, leading GI to a 5th place finish and just seven points out of third. Jacob Kosmicki (11th at State) and Juan's brother Eder (22nd) graduated in May, but there is still plenty of talent for the Islanders.

Juan has been a workhorse this summer, with weekly mileage this summer ranging between 40 and 90 miles. I've been following him on Strava since late July, and his number of long runs at 6:00 pace is somewhat mind boggling. On what was supposed to be a 10-15 mile run on August 2nd, he felt so good that he ran an impromptu and solo 2:51 marathon (6:31 pace) just a day after a hard 10-mile run.

This base mileage has paid off handsomely so far this year. Juan cut over one minute off his Kearney High meet time from 2019, finishing a second behind Evan Caudy of North Platte in 15:50. He opened the season with a 16:06 win at the Minuteman Invite, and most recently ran 16:11 to finish ahead of Evan Caudy at the Grand Island meet on September 22.

Juan and Evan will certainly have had their fill of each other by the end of the season. While they won't encounter many teams from Omaha and Lincoln due to this year's shift to smaller meets and less travel, the two boys expect to race each other again at UNK, GNAC and State.

Juan was a relatively late arrival to running, joining the junior high track team in 8th grade because Eder was enjoying competing in high school. Eder inspired Juan to work hard at distance running, and it's easy to see how; even after graduating in May, Eder logged back-to-back weeks of over 100 miles this summer. Juan had a strong freshman season, qualifying for State XC (a season best of 17:21) and running a 10:10 3200 in the spring. As a sophomore, he dropped his PR to 16:24 at State (8th) and finished the season with a 16:22 at Nike Regionals.

He's only a junior so Juan hasn't spent much time thinking about college programs yet, particularly since some colleges are limiting on-campus visits. Similar to most of the other runners featured in this article, he includes UNL on his wish list, but it's too early for him to limit his choices. His goal is to finish in the top three at State this year and in 2021, and we expect that there will be a long list of colleges that will value his academic and athletic potential.

Evan Caudy, a junior at North Platte, won't have the chance to be a four-time State XC qualifier like Daniel and Juan – simply because he played football as a freshman. He didn't run XC or track in middle school either, and never had designs on becoming a distance runner. However, his freshman basketball coach also happened to be a track coach, and he encouraged Evan to go out for track after seeing how well Evan performed in basketball conditioning over the winter. Evan quickly saw success, qualifying for State in the 3200 with a 9:56 at Districts before finishing 14th at State with a 10:06.

While he didn't medal at State track as a freshman, the experience allowed him to appreciate the high level of competition in Class A, and he realized how hard he would need to work to be successful. He embraced summer conditioning and had an incredible first season of cross country, never finishing lower than 5th. He recorded a PR of 16:19 to finish 5th at State while North Platte finished 10th.

Despite the lack of a spring season due to COVID, the North Platte boys team had strong participation this summer, with up to 40 boys participating at some point. Evan averaged about 30 miles per week with one or two speedwork sessions (tempo or hill repeats) per week.

Evan's goals prior to the season were to drop his PR below 16:00, place in the top 5 at State again, and help the team improve on last year's finish. At the Kearney High meet on September 11, he sprinted the last 400 meters to finish in 15:49, beating Juan Garcia by 1.02 seconds. In his subsequent race against Juan on September 24, Evan finished second in 16:24.

When Evan first started distance running – just over 18 months ago – his first impression was that it wasn't that enjoyable. However, once he started racing, he realized that the competitive nature he experienced in basketball was amplified in distance running. He also found that running for this team and for God was exceptionally motivating; he didn't want to disappoint either with a lackluster performance.

It defies odds that Evan, with just one track season and less than two seasons of cross country under his belt, has so quickly become one of the state's best runners. He got off to a late start with this distance running gig, but it's become clear that he intends to make up for lost time.

On August 29, junior Gabe Hinrichs of Elkhorn South became the first Nebraska runner this season to break the 16:00 barrier, and he's arguably had the most impressive season to date. In his four races, he's run 15:55 (Westside), 15:51 (Walnut Grove), 16:04 (Pioneers' Park) and 16:20 (Walnut Creek) while gapping the field by the one-mile mark. I was able to watch three of his races, and he runs with an athleticism that looks like it would translate to another sport.

Which it does. Like Evan and Juan, Gabe is a relatively late arrival to the running scene. He began playing baseball when he was five, played tackle football in 5th & 6th grade, and has played basketball at Elkhorn South that past two years. For most of June, his weekday routine consisted of team runs at around 8:00 a.m., basketball conditioning at mid-morning, and a Legion baseball practice or game most

afternoons or evenings. Because of the time commitment for Legion baseball this summer, he limited his weekly mileage to around 40 miles, and his longest run was 10 miles.

Although Gabe didn't attempt distance running until the 7th grade cross country season, he suspected he might have a talent for it. His mom, Kathy Dalton Hinrichs, ran at both Waverly High School and Wayne State College, and she continues to run. (His sister Kylie is a sophomore runner at Elkhorn South.) I asked Gabe at what age he finally broke his mom's PR for the 5k, and his response was, "I guess I still haven't ran faster than her. If you ask her, she'll say that she's faster than me at every distance." It's pretty clear where Evan got his competitive streak...

Gabe's only track season was in 7th grade. He stuck with baseball in his 8th grade and freshman years and then lost the sophomore track season to COVID. Last February he was able to run one indoor 1600 in 4:41, and he time-trialed a 4:32 in May with former teammate Derek Madden.

Although Gabe's season thus far this year has been consistent, he admits to having a few ups and downs in his first two years. As a freshman, he debuted with a 17:45 at Seward and then improved to 16:47 at Districts, placing 10th. However, he admitted that his focus prior to the State meet was split between running and the upcoming basketball season, and he simply didn't feel good that day. He finished 62nd in 17:58.

His sophomore year was a roller coaster, with times over 18:30 at both the Seward and UNK invites. In contrast, he ran below 17:30 at the Fremont Invite and the Metro meet. He recalled: "I struggled all year to keep up with my teammate Derek in practice because I knew it would make me better. I was thinking too much, and I don't think I finished an entire speed workout until the week of Metros. Cutting back mileage that week really helped, and starting with Districts I just raced for a place instead of worrying about times." With fresh legs and a new mindset, Gabe finished the season with 3rd place at Districts (16:53 at Pioneers' Park) and 13th at State (16:34).

That late-season success provided the fuel for Gabe to work hard over the winter. His sophomore basketball team practiced in the mornings, so he ran almost every afternoon with Derek. They continued to run through the cancelled track season, and Gabe believes his fitness level is as good as it's ever been. His goal is to win State before he graduates, and he understands what a challenge that will be. At the team level, he thinks Elkhorn South can be a top 6 team, improving from their 9th place finish in 2019. The program's best boys finish since the school opened in 2010 is 3rd place in Class B, and Gabe feels like the team has the potential to do very well at Districts and State.

Gabe has been a bit more active in college searches than others. He's reached out to a number of D1 programs to find out what marks he needs to run to meet their recruiting standards, and breaking 16:00 was the first step towards meeting those marks. He's interested in pursuing a computer science degree, which most colleges offer, so at this point he's looking for an affordable college that would be a good fit for him academically and athletically.

An article on this season's top performers would not be complete without discussing Liem Chot, a senior at Lincoln North Star. Liem's path to running success – and to America – is a wonderful story, and NETC first wrote about him in August 2019 (<https://www.nebraskaelitetc.org/single-post/2019/08/28/LiemChot>). We caught up with him earlier this week to focus on developments since last year.

A two-time defending Class A State champion, Liem's goal is to win State a third time – and become only the second Class A boy to do so since at least 1995 (Colby Wissel of Kearney won in 2001-2003). Like Gabe Hinrichs, Liem is undefeated this year, running 15:55 on a challenging Seward course, 16:07 to break the Skutt course record by over 30 seconds, 16:05 at Norfolk (another course record) and 16:09 at the North Star meet. Liem's time at Seward was a 47-second improvement, and his Norfolk time was a 67-second improvement. Despite those gains, he feels like he hasn't fully exerted himself since Nike Regionals last November.

Prior to this year, Liem's PRs were 15:50, 4:24 (6th at 2019 State) and 9:39 (2nd at 2019 State). He hopes to run below 4:20 and 9:20 this spring, but first he has an ambitious 5k goal for this fall.

In addition to winning State, Liem would like to achieve a sub-15:00 5k in the next few months. He was initially targeting the super-fast Nike Regional course for this attempt, but it seems more likely that he'll give his best shot in a track time-trial after the high school season. To prepare for a sub-15:00 effort, he's been trying to run at a 4:50 pace in his 1K and mile repeats workouts. He noted, "I feel like I've got a great base after running 500 miles this summer. Right now my legs feel amazing. I've never felt so fit or strong." At this point in his development, he still feels like the 5k is his best event, but he probably enjoys the 1600 more.

Liem is also high on Lincoln North Star's chances in the team race. Despite losing Daniel Pierce and Asim Ali (14th & 16th at State) to graduation, LNS is ranked third this year behind Fremont and Millard West. Grant Wasserman and Ethan Zaborowski are running strong in 2nd and 3rd position this year, and LNS has won three of their four meets. Based on how hard the team has trained all summer, Liem believes that the team has the potential to make a statement at State. North Star will compete at the Lincoln City meet and the HAC championships prior to Districts, so the season is quickly winding down.

Due to the recruiting dead period for NCAA Division 1 programs, Liem has mainly focused on submitting applications rather than arranging on-campus visits. He's evaluating Nebraska-based programs at all NCAA levels, but he's also intrigued by Temple and Florida Gulf Coast. He'd like to pursue a medical career in physical therapy or psychology, and he understands that excelling at academics in college will be the key to a successful career.

Just over a year ago, Liem told me that he had been baptized the previous April and counted his Christian faith as one of his greatest gifts. This past week, I asked him what has motivated him to work so hard the past four years, and he brought up his faith again. "I run for the glory of God." And then he somehow managed to make a reference to Steve Prefontaine and Jesus that seemed perfect: "Jesus gave his best for me, and for me to give anything less than my best is to sacrifice my gift."

In addition to these five young men, Drew Snyder (LSW), Owen Wagner (Fremont), Grant Wasserman (LNS), Sam Kirchner (Millard West) and Henry Slagle (Creighton Prep) have also run under 16:30 this year. In the midst of a season that was almost cancelled, we may get the chance to see one of the most competitive State meets in recent memory.

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