

## **Jake Ralston, Junior, Papillion LaVista South High School**

Picture this. The 2016 Class A State championship cross country race. As expected, Seth Hirsch and Milo Greder are about to claim the top two spots, but there is a fierce battle for third place with less than 800 meters remaining. Senior Longins Kouri (Grand Island), junior Jake Ralston (Papio South) and sophomore Jose Gonzalez (Fremont) are in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, separated by less than 5 yards. As the runners begin the descent into the final 180-degree turn, a NSAA golf cart rolls ahead of the trio. Kouri and Ralston follow the golf cart, and within seconds they realize that the golf cart is leading them off the course – and away from the finish line. Jake hurdles the flagged rope that separates the spectator area from the race course; Longins soon does the same, and they fall in behind Jose for the mad sprint to the finish. Jake finishes fourth, less than two seconds behind Gonzalez, in 16:01. He immediately congratulates Gonzalez.

He wanted third place. However, disappointment quickly turns into resolve. By the time he receives his medal two hours later, his sights are already set on Burke Stadium. The 2017 State track meet can't come soon enough.

This is what Jake Ralston does. He overcomes obstacles, never complains, sets high goals and then achieves them.

### **The gym class mile**

Jake dabbled in a number of sports through junior high. He played soccer and flag football through 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and he played golf in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. In elementary school, his gym teacher encouraged Jake and his classmates to run, and he eventually realized that he always looked forward to annual gym class mile race.

Although neither of his parents run, they encouraged him to join the Bellevue Breeze, a local USATF club team, in the spring and summer of sixth grade. He doesn't remember his first race, but he vividly remembers a rainy 3,000-meter race that season when he felt like he could run all day. He ran for the Cornhusker Flyers after his 7<sup>th</sup>- and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade track seasons, and his PRs steadily improved from 5:18 in the 1500 in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 4:36 as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader. He also ran for Papillion Middle School, and his PR for the 1600 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade was 4:57.6.

While Jake had embraced running, his first love was still football, particularly Nebraska football. He began playing tackle football in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, specializing at wide receiver. Despite his success in junior high and Junior Olympic track during 8<sup>th</sup> grade, he remained firmly committed to playing freshman football at Papio South.

### **A change of heart**

A few things happened to Jake's childhood plan of playing college football. For starters, his physique is more suited to running than football; at 5'6", he's compact with above-average muscle for a runner. More importantly, he kept getting better at running. After playing football instead of cross country his freshman year, he ran exceptionally well during the track season. In his only indoor meet, he shaved his 1600 PR by 10 seconds down to 4:47, and his season best was 4:36. He had even more success in the

3200, consistently running under 10:00 and finishing the season with an 8<sup>th</sup> place medal at State in a PR of 9:43.

Jake participated in summer football workouts leading up to his sophomore year, and was prepared to put in the effort to climb the depth charts on the football team. However, his State track performance proved that he was a legitimate contender for a State cross country medal, and Jake eventually decided that his best athletic opportunity was in running.

He steadily improved during his sophomore cross country season, running a 17:25 in his first race but dropping his PR to 16:32 two weeks later. He placed 12<sup>th</sup> at the mid-season UNK invite, and then returned to Kearney to finished 13<sup>th</sup> at the State meet. Two State meets, two medals.

His sophomore track season was equally impressive. After opening the season with a 4:29 indoor mile, he dropped his PR to 4:24 at the Metro championships, good for 3<sup>rd</sup> in a stacked field. In the 3200, he opened with a 9:41 at Millard South before running a 9:32 at Bellevue East and a 9:27 at Metros. He finished the season by placing 5<sup>th</sup> at State in the 3200 at 9:27. His 1600 race at State was less successful due to an ill-advised decision to lead most of the second lap; he finished 16<sup>th</sup> in 4:32 but, more importantly, he learned a lesson in race tactics that will pay dividends for years to come.

Coach Shannon Stenger of Papio South feels that Jake's greatest strength is his ability to have consistent performances in practices and races, and the fall 2016 cross country bore this out. Jake placed 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> in all of his pre-District meets, and he won the highly-competitive UNK Invite in 16:12. He lowered his PR to 16:04 in placing 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Metro meet at his home course, the very challenging Walnut Creek course. He finished 3<sup>rd</sup> at Districts behind Seth Hirsch and Milo Greder before finishing 4<sup>th</sup> at State. Four State meets, four medals.

### **Low profile and high expectations**

Despite his consistent results at State meets, Jake may be the Nebraska's most low-profile elite runner. He's naturally quiet – his parents report that he's not even loud with his freshman sister Emma or his 6<sup>th</sup>-grade brother Cam. Coach Stenger and Jake agree that Jake's role on the team is to lead by example and to be consistent. Two seniors, Kyler Caverzagie and Sean Irwin, are the vocal leaders for Papio South, and Jake says his best running memories are long runs during cross country when his teammates hone their comedy routines.

Jake has great respect for Coach Stenger, who has been at Papio South for eight years, including the last six as the Head Cross Country/Track & Field Coach. He feels that Coach Stenger cares about everyone on the team, and the two meet several times each week to discuss workouts and Jake's physical condition.

Coach Stenger raves about Jake. In addition to his consistency, Coach Stenger appreciates that Jake will do anything he asks. He never complains about a tough workout, and Coach Stenger has been increasingly challenged to find workouts that are difficult for Jake. Jake has high goals, and Coach Stenger is fully investing in helping him reach those goals. While a State title may be out of reach this

spring if Seth Hirsch and Milo Greder continue to run well, Coach Stenger believes that Jake has a good opportunity to win at least one State championship during his senior year.

Jake's current PRs are 2:05 (800), 4:24 (1600), 9:27 (3200) and 16:01 (XC). The Papio South school record for the 1600 of 4:19.58 is held by Mark Nelson, and Coach Stenger thinks that Jake has a chance to break that mark this spring. By graduation, Jake would like to improve his PRs to 2:00, 4:15, 9:15 and 15:40. Jake's most ambitious goal is to beat Coach Stenger's 4:07 PR for the mile, which he ran in a road race several years after running track/cross country at UNK.

Distance programs typically ratchet up recruiting during a junior's track season, and this interview took place prior to Jake's first track meet. He's a strong student and would like to study a math-related field like engineering. Iowa State is appealing to him because Milo Greder (Westside) and John Nownes (Creighton Prep) will be there, and Jake's lifelong devotion to Nebraska football also makes Nebraska's running program an attractive destination. As he is in most matters, Jake's terribly sensible about the recruiting process: he wants to run for a program that wants him.

### **Workouts**

Jake averaged 50 miles per week during summer running, and he averaged just under 50 miles during the winter season. During the season, the distance team practices six days per week, and Jake's average in-season weekly mileage is just over 50 miles. Logan Clark of Papio South is Jake's consistent training partner, and Coach Stenger likes that they're so evenly matched. Until the midpoint of the season, Jake will run twice per day one or two days per week. In addition, the team performs a core and/or plyometric workout before or after each run, and most of the boys' team will lift weights or perform a circuit twice each week. Finally, this year Jake has begun a weekly aqua-jogging session and will occasionally use a resistance bike. During the season, he sits in an ice bath after each practice.

Coach Stenger emphasizes a strong mileage base in the off-season and early in the season. Away from the track, he employs a variety of workouts, including hilly distance runs, hill repeats, tempo runs, fartlek runs and progression runs. Jake loves to run fast – his favorite race would be the 400 if Coach Stenger would ever let him run it – so his favorite workouts are on the track. Coach Stenger will utilize long repeats of up to 2,000 meters, shorter repeats of 300 or 400 meters, and a 1500-meter simulation where runners go faster than race pace for two sets of a 400,400,400 and 300, with 20 to 30 seconds of rest between each lap. Toward the end of the season, Coach Stenger will shift to shorter repeats of 150 to 200 meters to sharpen speed, and he'll occasionally film the runners at top speed so they can watch their form in slow motion.

Jake's has several favorite workouts, all on the track. He enjoys a 12-lap fartlek workout, alternating between fast (1:10-1:15) and slow (1:30-1:35) 400s. He also likes a 400-600-800-1600-2000 ladder workout, as well as high-speed 200-meter repeats. His toughest workout is a 4-mile tempo run on a hilly route, followed by 6 x 400 hill repeats.

As he's gotten more serious about running, Jake has made some slight adjustments to his nutrition plan. He no longer eats the school-provided lunch, and instead brings a healthier lunch that includes a ham, turkey or peanut-butter-honey-cinnamon (PBHC) sandwich. He's never been particularly fond of

drinking water, but he's trying to drink more and will add a BCAA (branched-chain amino acid) supplement a few times each day. The PBHC sandwich, along with a pair of racing-only socks, are the only race-day rituals he follows.

### **A win for the running community**

This author has watched Jake's evolution over the past three years as he's moved from the Cornhusker Flyers to Papio South. In some respects, Jake hasn't changed much; his consistency, work ethic, love of competition, and focus on results have always been visible. However, it's now clear that when he imagines himself competing in a university stadium packed with screaming fans, there's no doubt he'll be wearing a singlet instead of football pads. That's definitely a win for fans of Nebraska distance running.

*Jay Slagle is a volunteer writer for the Nebraska Elite TC website. The father of three teenagers, including a Creighton Prep runner, Jay is a self-professed running nerd who was never good at running. He has written two children's books available for sale on Amazon. Visit [www.jayslagle.com](http://www.jayslagle.com) for more information.*