

Ben Arens, Senior, Ainsworth High School

Imagine standing at the starting line of a major cross country race, surrounded by 150 other runners. You hear the gun and you sprint to reach the front of the pack. After 200 meters, just as your legs and lungs have adjusted to this ridiculous effort, something hits you at full speed and knocks you to the ground. The hit doesn't hurt so much but oh, but the landing – holy cow, that landing makes you remember why you never played tackle football. What's the old joke your grandpa used to tell? "It's not the jump that hurts, it's the landing."

You get up as fast as you can and you start chasing the pack. Your left hip hurts. It should, because when you hit the ground, the impact was so significant that it broke off a piece of your pelvis bone – the doctor would later call it an avulsion fracture – and at the same time, or maybe over the next sixteen minutes, you also suffer a partially torn left hamstring. You limp for the next 100 meters, decide that catching up to the leaders is more important than dwelling on the pain, and you forget about the pain until a few minutes after the finish when you're walking up a hill. A few days later, you first learn the phrase, 'avulsion fracture.'

What's the worst part of the story? For Ben Arens, there were two disappointments. First, despite a heroic effort to reach the leaders, he finished second in that race, the 2017 Class D State Championship. Seventeen seconds out of first, four seconds ahead of third place. Even worse, when he was in the best shape of his life, he had to stop running for eight weeks until his leg was healed.



Like many cross country coaches in small towns, Jared Hansmeyer coaches both the middle school and high school teams. He's coached Ben since 7th grade, and he knew from the start that Ben's determination and work ethic would set him apart as an Ainsworth athlete. However, for nearly all of elementary school, Ben thought his future was in football. He and his older brother Jack lived and breathed football, right up until the fall when Jack got his first taste of tackle football in 7th grade. While Jack played well, it was pretty clear that neither Jack nor Ben had the genetics to be Nebraska's next great linebacker. Jack switched to cross country in 8th grade. By then Ben was in 6th grade, and he was hooked as soon as he watched Jack compete in a cross country race. His passion only intensified a few years later when his cousin Zachary Welch won the 2014 Class D State Championship while running for Ainsworth.

Ben's career has had some ups and downs. His 1600 PR was 5:35 in 8th grade which, he now realizes in retrospect, didn't set the world on fire. He had a promising freshman cross country season, finishing 16th at the State meet, but his best times in track were a 4:59 1600 and a 10:47 3200. By the end of the season, he realized that he hadn't put in the work necessary to be successful.

His sophomore year was clearly the year that Ben blossomed. After a 4th-place finish at State cross country, he finished the track season by finishing 2nd in the Class C 1600 in 4:30 and 3rd in the 3200 in 9:44. At that point, he still wasn't sure he wanted to run beyond high school. However, after the two-week NETC summer camp in Colorado, he was certain he wanted to compete in college. For perhaps the first time, he was surrounded by a large group of people who loved running as much as he did. He's

continued to foster the friendships from camp, and he keeps in touch with runners from Kearney, Minden, Lincoln and other towns.

As a junior, he finished second in the Class D State cross country meet (in part because of that pesky avulsion fracture), and then he captured the Class C titles in the 1600 (4:26) and 3200 (9:43). He capped off his cross country career by winning the 2018 All-Class Gold, edging out Liem Chot of Lincoln North Star by six seconds. His best track times thus far this year have been 4:33 and 9:51, but he's healthy and prepared for Districts and State.

Ben has continued to increase his mileage as he's aged, running 65-70 miles per week last summer and 45-50 miles this past winter. His favorite workouts are mile repeats with 5-7 repetitions with 60-90 seconds rest intervals. During the past cross country season, his best effort was 6 x mile at an average pace of 5:27. His toughest workouts are 800-1000 meter repeats in the bowl of Long Pine Hills Canyon, with the repeats starting on the canyon flats and finishing at the top of the hills.

Ben is a meticulous planner, with head track coach Bryan Doke noting that Ben plans his eating schedule, is diligent about getting enough sleep, and knows his mileage totals at any moment of the week. Coach Doke observes that Ben paces about as well as a stop watch, and Coach Hansmeyer marvels at how Ben looks ahead as soon as he reaches a goal.

Ben has committed to running at the University of Nebraska-Kearney next fall. He enjoyed all of his college visits, but chose Kearney in large part because of the Kearney Health Opportunity Program (KHOP). KHOP is a selective program that streamlines the process for rural students to earn an undergraduate degree at UNK and gain early acceptance into UNMC's advanced healthcare programs. While Ben is open to many career paths, his current goal is to become a doctor.

Regardless of whatever health profession Ben chooses, we're pretty sure he'll be successful. When he's out of school and seeing patients, he'll have a great story to them about avulsion fractures. He'll probably start it with, "I heard about this kid who broke his hip during a cross country race..." His patients probably won't believe him. They'll chalk it up as one of those crazy stories that old people are always telling...



*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](https://twitter.com/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.*