

Taylor Somers, Senior, Millard South High School

Self-motivation. A dedication to small improvements in training, nutrition and cross-training. A singular focus on winning. This combination had led to thirteen Class A State medals for senior Taylor Somers of Millard South, and her best performances still appear to be ahead of her.

Tiger parents can relax

Although specialization in one youth sport has become common in the United States, Taylor is a great example of how participating in multiple sports may be a better approach. Taylor played softball and soccer throughout grade school, and at one point had ambitions of playing collegiate softball. However, she stopped growing when other girls didn't, and during middle school she realized that she might not have the stature needed to play competitive softball.

Fortunately, Taylor had been introduced to track while at Andersen Middle School, and she'd found quite a bit of success there. As a 7th-grader she won the 1600 at the Millard Schools middle school meet in a blazing 5:35, outdueling her season-long competitor and friend, Camryn Larsen (now at Millard West). She did not run cross country in middle school, preferring to focus on soccer, but she returned to the track in 8th grade and posted similar results during a storm-plagued season.

When Taylor enrolled at Millard South, she had the good fortune to inherit a mentor in the form of Katie Spencer, one of Nebraska's top runners. During the two years that Taylor and Katie were teammates, Katie garnered two runner-up finishes at State cross country and two at State track, as well as two All-Class golds her senior year in 4:55 (1600) and 10:31 (3200). Katie also served as a role model in terms of work ethic and leadership, and Taylor has applied those lessons well.

Training plans

The Millard South cross country coach is also the distance coach during the track season. Taylor was coached by Dustin Llewellyn during her freshman and sophomore years and by Simon Falcon her last two years. Coach Falcon works collaboratively with Taylor and Dustin on her in-season training plan, and Taylor relies on Dustin for her off-season workout plans. Taylor has been more assertive in adjusting those plans as she's learned how to listen to her body. During the summer prior to her junior year, she averaged about 40 miles per week but ranged from 30 to 50. She had lower mileage this past summer since her track season ran into late June. She is aiming for 30-35 miles per week this winter. She enjoys running in bad weather, and planned to go straight from her interview to an outdoor run – just as an ice storm was bearing down on Omaha. She doesn't run intervals in the off-season, but she does use tempo runs and indoor meets to improve her speed.

During the XC and track seasons, her goal is to run 35-45 miles per week. Her favorite workouts are 1,000-meter repeats and tempo runs by time. These tempo runs are also her toughest workouts. In addition to the hard effort, tempos by time leave her frustrated that she doesn't know exactly how far she'll run until the tempo run is over – but she knows they make her better. Coach Falcon asks his team to run six days per week, but he won't discourage running on the seventh day if a runner wants to do so. Taylor has a habit of not running on Sundays, and for her it's as much of a mental break as a physical one. She takes 10-14 days off from running after each season.

She does employ several different methods of cross-training. During the off-season, she'll have three or four weight-training sessions each week with her team; the sessions typically include high-repetition exercises for arm, leg and abdominal strength. She will use an indoor bike to build up her fitness in the early portion of an off season, and she's added weekly yoga sessions this winter. A few years ago she noticed that her quickness decreased when she stopped playing soccer, so she'll occasionally perform soccer drills to regain some agility.

Motivation and coaching

Taylor is outgoing and has tried to embrace a leadership role among the Millard South distance runners. She feels a particular responsibility to help mentor three freshman – Maddie Krull, Lorelei Hayden and Hannah Denson – who all placed in the top 40 at State cross country this past fall. Just as Katie Spencer showed Taylor how to become self-motivated, think for herself and read her body, she's hoping to pass on that same wisdom to the freshmen runners. Coach Falcon places a high priority on building team camaraderie on the cross country team, and Taylor enjoys spending time with her teammates.

Coach Falcon noted that Taylor has performed well in part because she leaves no stone unturned. She has thoroughly researched how to eat better, and during the interview she gushed over 'smoothie bowls' that are one of her favorite meals. Coach Falcon noted that he repeatedly sees her doing small things – out-of-practice workouts and pre-race preparation – that are uncommon for most teenagers. Consequently, he tends to give her more freedom and decision-making authority than he does for his younger runners. Taylor gives Coach Falcon frequent reports on her mileage and additional workouts, and she uses him as a sounding board to keep her on track. He does not need to set goals for Taylor; she sets her own.

Coach Falcon ran competitively at Nebraska-Kearney and has been the head cross country coach and track distance coach at Millard South the past two years. In many ways, he feels Taylor's methodical approach is eerily similar to how he approached training in high school (Bellevue West) and college. Consequently, he has changed his coaching style for Taylor, and he keeps reminding her that "it's just running" and sometimes a great race can occur just by keeping things simple. Taylor admits that her biggest challenge is her tendency to overthink and worry about things beyond her control, so she appreciates Coach Falcon's reminders to stay relaxed.

Taylor's parents have been exceptionally supportive of her running career, and Taylor is doing her best to encourage her younger sister Ashley to fall in love with running. Ashley received the 'most improved runner' award at Millard South, but at this point her favorite sport is soccer.

Times and goals

Taylor ran her first cross country race as a freshman, finishing in 20:00 despite very few summer miles, and she recorded consistent improvement throughout the year before placing 3rd at State in 18:29. She battled hamstring tendonitis throughout her sophomore season, describing it as a 'lost season,' but she finished 3rd again in 19:26 on a very hot day in Kearney. She improved her PR to 18:20 during her junior season and captured her first State championship and All-Class gold in 18:34. She got a late start to training this past fall due to a prolonged track season, but she defended her Class A gold medal in 18:54.

The highlight of her season was an 18th place finish at Nike Regionals in 18:01 – the top 21 runners medal at this race, and she was thrilled to reach the podium.

Taylor has had equally impressive track results. She medaled in three events at the State meet as a freshman, running 2:16 (800), 5:17 (1600) and 11:29 (3200). She improved to 2:14 (3rd), 5:06 (4th) and 11:01 (4th) as a sophomore. As a junior, she ran 2:16 (2nd), 5:02 (1st) and 10:49 (1st). She won the All-Class gold medal in the 1600. She finished her season by running a 4:59 mile at the Festival of Miles in St. Louis.

For her final season, Taylor is hoping to improve her times to 2:13, 4:49 and sub-10:40. The Millard South school records are 4:55 and 10:31, and she believes the 1600 record is attainable. If she's able to take down that mark, her next goal will be to beat 4:49.2, the state record set in 2003 by Elizabeth Lange of Lincoln Pius.

College plans

Taylor's final four selections for college were Oklahoma State, Kansas State, University of South Dakota and Nevada-Reno. After academics, one of her top priorities was to be comfortable with her future coach, and she was able to establish a good rapport with the OSU coach through phone conversations before she visited the campus. During her visit, she enjoyed being with the team, including two former Millard South runners – Katie Spencer and Clara Nichols – and that camaraderie led her to select OSU. Oklahoma State finished 17th at the NCAA National meet this past November.

Taylor's has some sage advice on college recruiting. She suggests keeping an open mind to all schools at the beginning of the recruiting process, because an athlete who focuses only on their top choice may realize that the school doesn't meet his or her expectations during the on-campus visit. She advises athletes to start with a long list of possible schools based on academic interests, and then ask good questions during interactions with the coaches and current athletes. Running is fairly unique in that an athlete's time results can be interpreted fairly objectively by colleges, so Taylor doesn't think there is much value in targeting a college that doesn't appear interested in recruiting the athlete.

Looking ahead

While Taylor has had a successful career thus far, the track season doesn't offer guaranteed success. At least six of the top ten Class A runners in the 800, 1600 and 3200 from 2016 are returning for the 2017 season. In addition to this Class A talent, Taylor will have plenty of competition for All-Class titles from runners like Mazie Larsen (Gretna), Ryle Rice (Ainsworth), and Cameron Hucke (Hastings SC). However, if State medals are won through preparation and attention to detail, Taylor is going to be hard to beat.

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.