

The spristance athletes who can have it all

During the afternoon break of the Kearney invite in early April, I was certain I had made a mistake. The announcer had just listed the finalists for the 200 meters, and I thought I heard Kate Dilsaver's name. Kate Dilsaver? Nah, she couldn't possibly be in the 200 finals – she's one of the top distance runners in Nebraska.

Not only was Kate in that final, but she won the race over Sammie Scarlett (Kearney) and Elly Hartter (Lincoln East), who are both ranked in the Class A Top 10 this season. As I watched the race, I questioned myself again. The Kate Dilsaver who had just won the Kearney 200 absolutely looked every bit the sprinter – she couldn't possibly be the girl I remembered from cross country.

Welcome to the new world of spristance athletes, a place where athletes can be successful distance runners in the fall and sprinters in the spring. Rylee Rice, a junior at Ainsworth, is a 3-time state XC champion in Class D and won the all-class gold medal as a sophomore. However, she has also had great success in the track. As a freshman, she won four Class C State championships in the 100 hurdles (15.57), 300 hurdles (44.64), 800 (2:15) and 1600 (5:05), within range of the all-class golds in the last three events. As a sophomore, she won the Class C 100 hurdles, placed second in the 800 and had the second-fastest qualifying time in the 300 hurdles. However, she withdrew from the 300 finals and did not run the 1600 due to an injury, later determined to be a stress fracture. This season, she competed in seven different events (100H, 300H, 400, 800, 4x400, 4x800 and long jump) in four meets over a twelve-day period.

Two hundred fifty miles to the east, sophomore Kate Dilsaver of Lincoln Southwest is attempting to launch her own spristance career. In her first two cross country seasons, she's placed 13th and 16th in the Class A State championship. At the 2018 State track meet, she placed 7th in the 400 (a PR of 58.44 in prelims) and was a member of the all-class gold medal 4x400 team and the 3rd place 4x800 team.

Most cross country runners run the 800, 1600 or 3200 during track season, and dropping down to the 400 or 4x400 relay isn't unusual for those athletes. Kate wanted to take it a bit further this season, and last summer she began pestering Coach Brett Schuster to run the 200 at LSW's first meet this season. He agreed to let her run the 200 at the unscored LPS Open meet in late March, but she also had to run the 400 and 800. She won all three events, and Coach Schuster agreed to let her try the 200 one more time the following week at Kearney. After winning the Kearney title in 25.37, she won the Nebraska TrackFest title in a state-leading 25.02 and the LPS Championships title in 25.72. Kate added the 100 to her repertoire at the LPS and Heartland conference meets, winning the LPS race in 12.42 (7th best in all classes) and finishing third at HAC 12.46 behind Sammie Scarlett (Kearney) and Katelyn Thompson (LSW). As of May 2, she is ranked in the Class A top 10 in all four of her races: 100 (5th), 200 (1st), 400 (2nd in 57.93) and 800 (10th in 2:22.5).

Are Rylee and Kate just the start of a new wave of athletes who can excel at both distance and sprint events? Are their cross country experiences one of the key reasons why both girls have been so successful in track? Based on the excited reaction to my Twitter post last week about Kate, some coaches do seem to think that running cross country can help – or at least doesn't hurt – sprinters.

While Rylee and Kate's all-class performance levels in two disciplines are rare, I've run across a number of strong track athletes who also compete in cross country. Senior Brent Wetovick of Fullerton, a UNL middle distance track commit, has run cross country the past two years. In a span of six hours at the

2018 Class D State meet, he ran the 800 in 1:56.5 (1st), the 400 in 50.64 (1st) and the 200 in 23.81 (8th). Jack Krejci of Creighton Prep competed in cross country this past fall, and he has run 14.98 (100H) and 39.90 (300H) thus far in 2019. Sara Reifenrath of Hartington Cedar Catholic, who is currently ranked fourth or better in the all-class list for the 100, 200 and 400, placed 16th at last fall's Class C State cross country meet.

Rylee Rice's head track coach at Ainsworth is Bryan Doke, who also happens to be a full-time physical therapist. During our exchanges regarding Rylee, I asked Bryan if there was a causal link between cross country participation and subsequent success in the sprint and hurdle events. Bryan's a smart guy, and I'd have to spend an entire day with him to capture about one percent of what he knows about athletic training. However, he was willing to provide me with a dumbed-down answer I could understand.

First, it hasn't been well researched or proven that aerobic (distance) training benefits anaerobic or alactic (sprinting/explosion) performance. Each of us have a range of muscle fibers that can be modified from fast to slow or slow to fast, and certain types of training can maximize the capabilities of each athlete. At Ainsworth, the cross country program incorporates speed work during the season, and that may provide some benefit to Rylee in the spring. Cross country also improves foot and ankle strength that can help sprinters. However, Bryan believes that the majority of athletes become better sprinters by focusing on (a) improving their sprint technique, (b) sprinting in practice and (c) resting and staying fresh.

So why have Rylee and Kate excelled at spristance events? They likely have a genetic edge that gives them a wide range of transferable muscle fibers from fast to slow twitch. They're also not just runners. Rylee has played on Ainsworth's basketball team for three years, and she participates in summer running and lifting. Kate has been a member of LSW's basketball team the first two years of her career. Kate also travels much of the summer playing basketball with the Cornhusker Shooting Stars AAU team. Both Rylee and Kate are taking weightlifting classes this year, typically lifting four days per week during the school year, and they both feel the consistent strength training has helped them improve.

It is interesting to note that because of basketball commitments, Rylee and Kate rarely run during the winter. In addition, with Lincoln Southwest reaching the championship game on March 2, Kate missed the first eight track practices of the spring, and yet she still ran a 26.15, 1:00.93 and 2:23.87 exactly three weeks after her first practice. In addition, because Kate's AAU summer schedule is so full, she only runs once or twice per week until late July or early August.

Despite not running serious summer or winter mileage, Kate is an enthusiastic supporter of cross country and preaches the benefits of being a year-round athlete. While the miles she puts in during the fall may not have made her a faster sprinter, she is certain that cross country has helped her with the mental side (toughness, self-coaching, focus) during track season as well as in basketball. Both Kate and Rylee agree that a committed athlete needs to be engaged in fitness-building activities throughout the year, and cross country provides that plus a great team environment. Jack Krejci of Prep feels that the fitness base he developed in cross country has contributed to his stamina in the 300 hurdles.

Rylee and Kate have arrived at their spristance success on different timetables. Rylee first saw distance success in 7th grade when she won the Junior High state championship titles in the 800 (2:24) and 1600 (5:15). In 8th grade she added titles in the 100 hurdles (15.51) and 200 hurdles (29.45), and repeated in the 800 (2:20) and 1600 (5:11). Due to this early success, her cross country coach Jared Hansmeyer marvels at how well Rylee has handled the pressure and expectations put on her in high school.

Kate dabbled in track in middle school but didn't run competitively until her freshman cross country season, preferring to focus on club soccer and basketball. In contrast to pure distance runners who

meticulously plan and record their daily workouts, Kate simply shows up to track practice and does whatever sprint or middle distance workout that Coach Schuster has planned for her. That attitude meshes with her advice to younger runners: “Work hard every day, be open to trying new things, get enough sleep, and focus on improving your mental toughness.”

At the time of our interviews, neither Rylee nor Kate were sure what events they would run at Districts. Rylee has not competed in the 1600 this spring, and is likely to compete in the 100H, 300H, 800 and either the 4x800 or long jump. Since Lincoln Southwest will be in a tight team race for the State championship, Kate is willing to run in whichever individual and relay events below 1600 meters that Coach Schuster thinks could yield the most points for her team.

Since she’s only a sophomore, Kate hasn’t spent much time thinking about college. She would like to be part of a collegiate team, but it’s too early to tell whether it will be running or basketball. As a junior, Rylee is just starting her search, with Doane, Concordia and South Dakota State among a few of the colleges she plans to explore.

Are Rylee and Kate the start of a spristance revolution? The answer is likely ‘no,’ given that most Nebraska cross country athletes don’t see this level of success as sprinters. Whether they’re genetic wonders or the products of prolonged and committed multi-sport participation, let’s just agree to call Rylee and Kate one thing: “fast.”



*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.*