

Anna Jennings, Freshman, Papillion LaVista South High School

You don't know why, but you can't shake the feeling while you're with Anna Jennings. Does she remind you of a perennial flower that has just pierced the topsoil, with her blooms yet to come? Is she like a young horse that occasionally takes unsteady steps but already shows the spirit and raw talent of a future champion? Or is that nagging feeling of yours simply the realization that she's a lot like you were at age 14: eager, positive to a fault, sizzling with energy and, filled with unlimited potential?

It must be that.

But then her coach tells you what her greatest strength is – and she quickly agrees with her coach – and it stops you cold. How is it that this freshman, who has only been running seriously for nine months, has already discovered the Holy Grail of distance running?

Still early

Anna is a freshman at Papio South, with just one high school running season under her belt. However, it was an impressive one. In her first timed race, she ran a 22:05 at her team's time trial on the Walnut Creek course. She improved that mark to 21:06 in first meet on the same course. She made a huge leap two weeks later at Norfolk, improving her PR to 19:44 and finishing just 9 seconds behind Megan Means, Norfolk's standout runner. She took a step back at Metros at Walnut Creek, struggling to a 21:04, but bounced back by winning her first race in 19:07 at the District meet. She improved her PR again at State, finishing second behind Taylor Somers in 19:02, and posting the fourth-fastest time in all classes. She finished the fall season with an 18:53 at the Nike regional race.

Anna has played soccer for since she was five, and she didn't begin her running career until 7th grade cross country at Papillion Middle School. She describes that first season as being 'middle of the pack' and she was not among the Papio runners selected to race at the Nebraska Junior High State Championships. She had joined the team when her dad suggested it would help her conditioning for soccer. She wasn't particularly motivated to run, so she did little to no distance running outside of practice.

She saw more success in track, usually finishing first for her school in dual and triangular meets, and her 7th grade PRs were 2:38 (800) and 5:44 (1600). Her 8th grade cross country season was more productive, highlighted by a few wins and a 5th place finish at the State Championships. Rylee Rice of Ainsworth won the State meet, while Anna's teammates Emma Jones finished 3rd and Emma Ralston finished 15th. During Anna's 8th grade track season, and she improved her PRs to 2:31 and 5:41. However, soccer remained her top priority.

High school training

Coach Jeremy Haselhorst of Papio South is quick to point out that the summer before Anna's freshman year was her first extended period of serious training, so his emphasis this year is to hold back her mileage and watch for injuries. Anna's motivation levels have increased tremendously since 7th grade, and he thinks her biggest risk is spending too much time on her feet, particularly because she continues to play club soccer. Coach Haselhorst adjusts Anna's workouts based on her weekly soccer schedule, which generally includes two games and two practices in-season.

In terms of mileage, Anna averaged around 25 miles per week during summer running, 30 miles during cross country season, and she'll probably run around 35 miles during track season. Anna took a one-week break from running after the Nike race, and she spent much of the winter on time-based runs that were focused simply on building a foundation for track season. Winter running is a difficult for Anna because she doesn't like cold weather and she doesn't like to run on the treadmill, so she'll run at the Offutt indoor facility when she can.

During the season, Coach Haselhorst prescribes a fairly consistent mix of one long run, tempo runs, hill workouts and recovery runs. His cross country approach carries over into the first half of track season, so his runners have limited track-based workouts until the midway point of the track season. Despite spending relatively little time on the track, Anna reports that her favorite workout is any high-intensity interval workout, particularly 200- and 400-meter repeats. Her least favorite workouts are recovery runs that start slow and finish fast.

Leading up to last fall's final races, Anna felt her key sharpening workouts were timed runs at hard effort, 'flying 150' meter repeats to improve leg speed, and any workouts that allowed her to run fast.

Anna is so early into her running career that Coach Haselhorst is not pushing her to perform any crosstraining. However, he sees great benefits in Anna's soccer involvement. Anna is taking a weightlifting class at school, and the team tries to lift weights three times during summer training and twice during the season. During the season, the team has one arm workout and one leg workout, and the athletes focus on high repetition exercises that work multiple muscles – bench press, Olympic lifts and various forms of squats. For other runners, Coach Haselhorst recommends water running, swimming laps or biking as cross-training tools.

Like most of her peers, Anna does not tailor her nutrition approach to running. She avoids chocolate and eats better than she did a year ago, and her mother makes healthy dinners. However, she loves Chick-fil-A, doughnuts and Starbucks, so she eats pretty much like every other high school kid.

Motivation and support

While a reluctant runner at first, Anna has fully embraced the sport over the last nine months. She enjoys the mental break that running allows, and she purposely tries to avoid thinking about school or other stressors while running. Running has also introduced her to a new set of friends, and she enjoys the varied personalities among the forty girls on the Papio South team. Senior Anna Milton was particularly helpful to Anna during cross country season, both as a role model and as a calming influence just before the start of the State meet.

Led by Anna's 2nd place finish, the Papio South team finished 4th at the 2016 State cross country meet and the future seems bright. Papio South's top five finishers at State were freshman (Emma Jones in 20th and Emma Ralston in 40th) and sophomores (Taryn Robinson in 18th and Molly Simpson in 32nd). Looking ahead to the spring season, Coach Haselhorst expects strong performances from Anna Milton and Anna Jennings in the 800/1600 and from Taryn Robinson and Emma Jones in the 1600/3200.

Coach Haselhorst was a distance runner at Norfolk Catholic High School, graduated from Wayne State, and he taught at Papio Lavista for three years before moving to Papio South. He has been the head women's cross country coach since Papio South was opened 16 years ago, and he is also the distance coach for the women's track team. He loves coaching young women, noting that he finds they are coachable and just naturally want to do well. An injury between high school and college derailed his collegiate career, and he now restricts his running to trails due to a back injury. However, his fitness level is still high; several times a year he serves as a pacer for friends who run 100-mile trail races.

Coach Haselhorst feels it's too early to establish any expectations for Anna's running career, but it's clear he is taking a long-term view to Anna's development. Coach Haselhorst's primary objective this spring is keep Anna healthy while he monitors her adjustment to high school training. Anna appreciates Coach Haselhorst's approach of helping each of his runners improve themselves in running and life; he believes that distance running is a great tool to improve a student's character, academic work and self-worth, so he doesn't put much emphasis on winning.

Anna's father, Robert Jennings, describes himself as a 'running hack,' but he also plays an important role in Anna's running career. He doesn't want to be an overbearing sports dad, but he does help her stay focused on running by reminding her of her goals and things that might get in the way. Coach Haselhorst quickly volunteers that 'boyfriends' could be one thing that would get in the way of her goals. Anna's father is a Navy veteran, and his head nod suggested that he shares Coach Haselhorst's opinions on that topic.

Anna admits that it can be difficult to balance school, running, soccer and friends. Outside of sports, her school activities include the Key Club and the Circle of Friends, a program where students help special-needs classmates learn how to develop friendship skills and interact in social settings. She also volunteers at the Sump Memorial Library.

Races and goals

Anna considers the Nike regional race as the high point of her career. Anna finished in 18:53, which placed her 79th out of 800 highly-competitive runners, most of whom were upperclassmen. In addition to dropping her PR below 19:00, the race gave her confidence that she can fare well against stronger competition. She lists Norfolk and Kearney as favorite courses. Her least favorite course is her home course, Walnut Creek. She's struggled in her three timed races at Walnut Creek, and she suspects she's allergic to something in the meadows.

Anna has very few pre-race rituals. She has a pair of pink socks that she only wears for races, and she'll eat a Jimmy John's sandwich on race day. Since her racing experience is limited, her race approach during cross country season was to start conservatively, find a target to shadow and then improve her position over the final half of the race.

With just one season of results, it's difficult to project Anna's trajectory over the next three years. Anna's 1600 race PR is 5:41 but she ran a 5:15 during a summer workout, so her goal this spring is 5:10.

She's less focused on the 800 and would like to break 2:16. She'd also like to win a few races, since she's only won two thus far in her high school career.

In terms of long-term goals, Anna would like to break the 5:00 barrier in the 1600 and 18:00 in cross country. Of the two marks, 18:00 will be the most difficult. While Taylor Somers and Katie Spencer have both broken 5:00 in the past two seasons, www.athletic.net does not reflect any sub-18:00 races in Nebraska in the past five years.

Her greatest strength

Coach Haselhorst points to two things that make Anna a special runner. First, she has a natural high level of competitiveness. At times he has to develop that characteristic in his runners, but Anna has had it since he met her. She loves to race and she likes to be challenged, which may be a byproduct of her club soccer background.

More importantly, he says that Anna finds some level of joy in pain, whether it be in training or the late stages of a race. In 19 years of coaching, he's never had a runner who has relished the pain of running, but he thinks it could be her greatest weapon. Anna explains that she feels an adrenaline rush at the most difficult stages of a race, and she loves the feeling of breaking through a wall of pain by finishing strong.

Many coaches will say that a runner is only limited by what her body is willing to endure. If Anna Jennings truly thrives on pain, then the next three years could be painful for her competitors.

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.