

Mason McDonald, Senior, Millard West High School

If you've been paying attention to the Nebraska high school distance scene for the last decade or so, you've undoubtedly noticed that the Millard West boys' distance program is among the best in the state. In the last ten years, Millard has had three 3-time cross country State Medalists (Joe Harter, Austin Post and Seth Hirsch). Harter won the State XC title in 2012 and 3200 2013, while Hirsch won State titles in cross country (2015, 2016) and the 3200 (2017). Hirsch also set state records in cross country (14:56) and the 3200 (8:54), and he finished 3rd and 4th, respectively, at the Foot Locker and Nike national XC championships.

While these standout runners have garnered headlines, the true strength of Millard West's distance program is its ability take raw freshmen and, with years of incremental improvement, turn them into medal contenders or significant role players at key meets. The Millard West boys team has won the most (four) boys Class A State XC titles since 2008, but its most impressive finish is arguably the 2014 runner-up trophy. With a hobbled Seth Hirsch (17th place) and without any medalists, the 2014 team was able to knock off pre-race favorites Fremont and Papio South to finish second behind Creighton Prep.

Mason McDonald, a senior at Millard West, was once one of these raw freshmen, and he could be the poster child for the success of Coach Colin Johnston's distance program. While Mason dabbled in track and cross country at Russell Middle School, he was a committed club soccer player prior to high school and intended to use freshman cross country to stay in shape for spring soccer. However, after he won the freshman race at the Class of the Metro, he decided that he might have some potential in cross country. His freshman PRs – 17:49 in XC, 4:55 in the 1600 and 10:42 in the 3200 – didn't set the world on fire, but Mason and Coach Johnston could see significant improvement throughout the year. With Coach Johnston's encouragement, Mason committed to a consistent running program the following summer, something he hadn't done prior to his freshman year.

The summer mileage paid off, and Mason's sophomore year reflected huge improvements. He immediately earned a spot on the varsity XC team on that 2016 team, and he had a front-row seat to watch how hard Seth Hirsch worked to be successful. The 2016 Millard West team won the State title, edging Fremont by two points, with two medalists and all seven runners in the top 41. The following spring, Mason recorded huge gains, cutting his PRs down to 4:33 and 9:56. He qualified for State in the 1600, finishing 20th in 4:39.

Mason continued this success into his junior year, finishing 10th at the State cross country meet and running a 16:11 PR at Nike regionals. However, he couldn't gain traction during the winter despite a high level of commitment, and he was subsequently diagnosed with an iron deficiency. There are many factors that lead to iron deficiency, but Mason largely blames genetics, the stresses of high mileage and an attempt to cut red meat out of his diet. Once diagnosed, he began taking iron supplements and adjusted his diet. He attempted a few races to salvage the track season, but his bests were only 4:55 and 10:42. Mason and Coach Johnston agreed to have Mason begin his end-of-season reset in late April so that he could be fully healthy for summer training.

Mason averaged 60-65 miles per week beginning in June. He also continued a weightlifting program focused on injury prevention. He had a strong senior season in cross country, ending with a 9th place finish at State and a 16:12 at Nike Regionals. Despite the extreme weather from this past winter, he managed to average 65 miles per week in the offseason, and he came into the spring with the best base he's ever had. He's been a model of consistency in his six meets leading up to Districts, with his four 1600 times between 4:25 and 4:34 and three 3200 results between 9:31 and 9:36. As of May 8, he was ranked first in the state in the 3200 and third in the 1600. On May 10, he comfortably qualified for the State meet by running a 4:27.44 and 9:40.41 at Districts.

Mason gives credit to others for allowing him to be in a position to perform well at State. Coach Johnston, a 2002 Millard West graduate, was a 2006 All-Conference distance runner at Doane, and his running plans have consistently produced great results. Mason particularly leaned on his coaches for guidance and motivation as he struggled to rebound from his iron deficiency. He and his teammates – Connor Hayes, Tony Miller and Adam Murphy are also having strong seasons – push each other in workouts, but also hold one another accountable if their best effort isn't being put forward. He's also had the benefit of older Millard West mentors such as Seth Hirsch, Josh Klein and John Quigley.

Coach Johnston notes that Mason has had a "solid last three cross country seasons but has been a bit unlucky in track until this year. He has worked hard and wisely to maximize his great potential, which we recognized long ago but can now be seen outside of our team."

Mason's hard work extends beyond athletics. He's also a strong student intent on earning a degree in mechanical engineering. That major and his desire to stay in the Midwest helped him pare down his college choices, and in February he committed to study and compete at South Dakota State.

At the State meet, Mason will face stiff competition from Jose Gonzalez, Liem Chot, Grant West, Tyler Boyle and others. Earning a medal at the State track meet won't be easy, but neither has Mason's journey to reach this point. He's ready to give it his all.

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 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](https://www.nebraskaelitetc.org/single-post/2018/10/07/NoahLambrecht), 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.