

## **Sam Lueders, Junior, Blair High School**

Next week's Nebraska State track meet will feature competitive races in almost every event at every class level. The Class B boys 1600 and 3200 look to be particularly compelling with a stacked group of competitors likely in both events. The Class B Top 10 list currently includes Zach VanBrocklin (Norris), Aidan Wheelock (Minden), Caleb Lampe (Bennington), Dean Erdkamp (York) and Alexis Hernandez (Lexington). Sam Lueders of Blair, ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the 1600 and 1<sup>st</sup> in the 3200 in Class B per Athletic.net, has always figured he'd be in the thick of things.

Unlike some of the state's top runners, Sam Lueders didn't enter high school with a storied middle school career. While he had run a 4:58 1600 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, he chose football over cross country in junior high. He also chose a lot of other sports: basketball, baseball, swimming and wrestling, a sport he also pursued in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Consequently, the jump to high school cross country took some adjustment, with his freshman PR of 17:49 coming at State.

With a better understanding of distance running – and coming off a grueling wrestling season – in the spring Sam cut his 1600 PR down to 4:38 and ran a 10:31 in his only attempt at the 3200. He qualified for State in both the 1600 (20<sup>th</sup> in 4:44) and the 4x800 (9<sup>th</sup>).

The summer before his sophomore year, Sam ramped up his weekly mileage to 40-50 miles, and the extra work paid off handsomely. He finished in the top 8 of every race during the season leading up to State. However, after a fast early pace (in the lead pack at 2 miles), over the last mile he experienced extreme dizziness, fatigue and post-race vomiting after battling high winds and a heat index exceeding 90 degrees. On a day where several top runners sat out because of the flu or dropped out due to heat exhaustion, Sam's finishing time was more than two minutes slower than his previous race. It took him a few days to recover, but he didn't dwell on it, and instead worked harder. During the spring, he peaked at State, setting PRs and medaling in both the 1600 (8<sup>th</sup> in 4:32) and 3200 (3<sup>rd</sup> in 9:53).

Sam ramped up his mileage even more that summer, averaging 70-75 miles. During the fall, he won at all but two races, finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> to Zach Vanbrocklin of Norris at the conference meet and to Ryan Zavadil of Skutt at State. He followed that up with a win at the Nebraska Cross Country Festival and a 16:05 at Nike regionals. Instead of wrestling, Sam chose to devote this past winter to running, averaging 60 miles per week despite the historically-bad weather that Nebraska encountered this year. With PRs of 4:29 and 9:43 entering Districts, Sam looked to end the season on strong fashion.

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If you ask Coach Darren Harsin about Sam Lueders, he won't tell you about Sam's times. He'll tell you that Sam is a student of anything and everything related to running. He watches races on the Internet. He's well-read on nutrition, training methods, the different physiological impact of different training approaches, the objectives of his daily workouts, and even the history of distance running. Sam is so well-read on the topic that Coach Harsin has felt obligated to increase his own knowledge of training methods so that he's giving Sam the best possible direction. During the season, Coach Harsin will tailor workout plans to each of his runners, and he and Sam generally collaborate on developing Sam's workouts.

Because of Sam's deep interest in running, his plan for improvement is fairly specific. He wants to continue to maintain a high-mileage approach as long as it allows him to stay healthy. He believes in active recovery, often running every day, but his easy days are exceptionally easy. During the track season, his favorite workout is a 400 x 6 in 60 seconds with a 400 meter jog as the rest interval. His most challenging workout is a 200 x 5 at a sprint with a 50 meter jog as a rest interval. Last summer he also biked and swam prior to competing in a triathlon, and he may do that again this summer.

While Sam is utterly devoted to his running career, Coach Harsin notes that Sam isn't a one-trick pony. "He's got a 4.0 GPA, he's an Eagle Scout, he plays the French horn in band, and he's active in the school and at his church. While he loves to run, running doesn't consume nor define him."

Sam would like to run in college, although he is only now beginning to consider his options. As a strong student, fast runner and high-character person, there ought to be a number of colleges who will come calling. Once he's in college, Coach Harsin thinks that Sam's strength may lie races 5k and longer.

Above all, Sam focuses on the big picture. After narrowly missing the State XC title last fall, Coach Harsin expected Sam to be devastated. Instead, Sam almost immediately put the race into perspective and embraced earning a State XC medal for the first time in his career. In the combined all-class results, Sam had run the 7<sup>th</sup>-fastest time at State, and he savored that accomplishment.

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Running is a repetitive-motion sport, and overuse injuries (particularly tendinitis and stress fractures) are the scourge of distance runners. While Sam is a student of running physiology, he's also highly competitive, and only in retrospect did he realize that he might have missed the signs that trouble was brewing. A nagging ache in his foot was bothering him in mid-April, but every distance runner has something that doesn't feel quite right. He ran his 4:29 on April 26 at his final home meet, but realized the next day that his foot was too sore to train. He biked the next three days instead of running, and then ran two strong times at the conference meet. Unfortunately, the pain worsened, and he didn't run in the two weeks leading up to Districts. Last Thursday, he ran a 10:20 in the 3200, doing just enough to qualify for State. He sat out of the Districts 1600.

Sam's recent X-ray was negative for a stress fracture, so his plan is to cross-train until the State meet on Friday. By then, it will be almost four weeks since he's run in practice. Because his injury is presumed to be tendinitis, Sam knows he has can gut through eight laps. He may not win but he will do his best. Only a few people in the crowd will know his story, but the ones who do will be applauding every step he takes.

A once-promising season may not end the way that Sam wanted, but he's used to setbacks. In order to be a successful long-distance runner, an athlete has to have a long-term perspective. Sam knows his best days are ahead of him, and every day is an opportunity for him to get better.

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