

Late bloomers fuel the Creighton Prep distance program

After winning the Class A track and field championship in 2015 and 2017, fifth-ranked Creighton Prep is an underdog in the team race in 2019. However, it's a sign of Prep's success over the last five years that the team is even being mentioned as a title contender. The Creighton Prep team has averaged a 4th place finish over the past five years, fueled in part by its rejuvenated distance running program. At this week's State meet, the team has qualified three athletes in both the 1600 and 3200, one athlete in the 800, and its 4x800 team. Of those six athletes, four are seniors, and they will represent some of the most surprising success stories at the State meet.

In order to appreciate the how Creighton Prep and these boys arrived at this point, you first have to understand where they started.

While Creighton Prep teams have long been consistent performers in football, swimming, tennis and soccer, the same can't be said for the track team. During the 15 years from 1999 to 2013, Prep's average team place at the State meet was 15th. That average doesn't include five years where Prep didn't score one point. The distance program had even less success, scoring an average of one point over those 15 years.

Jack Polerecky, a 2014 graduate who later ran at Loyola Marymount, is often given credit as the driving force for Prep's distance revival. He placed 4th in the 2013 State 3200 but, more importantly, he instigated the cross country team's trips to the Wisconsin Ultimate Frisbee camp that was disguised as a cross country camp. Those team-building camps led to an increase in participation in Prep's summer running program, which in turn improved the results of the cross country team. After registering a top-3 team finish just once from 1999 to 2012, Prep has been a top-3 team in five of the last six years, including winning the title in 2014 and earning the runner-up trophy in 2018.

Polerecky finished his career as a state champion in the 3200, just edging freshman Seth Hirsch. He was the first in Prep's recent string of strong distance runners, including John Nownes, Thomas Doran, John Lukowski, Ryan Eastman and Jack Slagle. In addition to featuring high-level talent, the distance program also began to build depth, resulting in the Class A 4x800 title in three of the last four years.

This year's senior distance runners hope to build on this legacy. Grant West, Luke Dickas and Leo Burns return from the 2018 all-class gold 4x800 team, and Michael Buckley now rounds out the team. Although three of the four are returning medalists, fourteen months ago virtually no one – including the athletes themselves – would have predicted that they would all be in contention for individual State medals before they graduated. This is a story about late bloomers, team-building and the power of ambitious goals.

Leo Burns was the early star of this group, but only because he ran one varsity cross country race as a sophomore. He earned a varsity spot for the Millard South meet, but then lost his spot as

upperclassmen caught up to him. Leo didn't run track as a freshman or sophomore, playing soccer instead. He ran varsity in cross country during his entire junior season, finishing 56th at State. During track season, he set PRs of 2:04 and 4:37, and qualified for State as part of the 4x800 team. The team peaked at State, winning the all-class gold in 7:52. This past fall he was 27th overall and the 5th Prep finisher at State, helping secure the 2nd place trophy. His best individual times this season are 1:57.68 (3rd fastest in State prior to Districts) and 4:31.13. He has qualified for State in the open 800 and the 4x800.

Michael Buckley also was on the varsity cross country team for most of his junior season. His large family is sports crazy, but he's the only one to seriously pursue running. His year-by-year cross country PRs (ignoring the table-flat Sioux Falls courses) were 19:30, 17:56, 17:25 and 16:34. He finished 26th at last fall's State meet. In track, his best times as a junior were 2:02 and 4:47. However, at the end of his junior season, he decided he wanted to run in college. That goal has motivated him for the last twelve months, and it has paid dividends. This season he has split under 2:00 multiple times in the 4x800, he's run faster than 4:31 barrier three times, and his PR has dropped from 4:47 to 4:29.3 (5th fastest in State prior to Districts). He's qualified for State for the first time, in both the 1600 and 4x800.

Luke Dickas wanted to play basketball at Prep but eventually realized that he was more suited to running. He's a disciplined, quiet young man with a strong focus on academics, and distance running played to those strengths. His cross country success was also delayed, and his year-by-year cross country PRs were 19:49, 18:53, 17:20 and 16:17. He didn't run his first varsity cross country race until the State meet at the end of his junior year, when he finished 44th overall and 4th for the team. That taste of success was a springboard to the track season, where he ran PRs of 1:59.45 and 4:35. He just missed a State medal in the open 800, finishing 9th, and split 1:55 as a member of the winning 4x800 team. He amplified his workouts this past summer, which led to the Metro Conference XC title and an 8th place finish at State in Kearney. He's been hampered by a few minor injuries this spring, but has still recorded a season-best 2:00.5 and a PR of 4:30.7 (9th in Class A). He has qualified for State in the 1600 and 4x800.

Grant West is, without a doubt, the last to bloom among these four runners. He played football as a freshman and sophomore. In freshman track, he triple jumped and ran the occasional 800 and 1600, with season-bests of 2:23 and 5:21. As a sophomore, he focused solely on distance events, running bests of 2:10.6 and 5:00. That was the season when he connected with Luke and Michael, and he realized he enjoyed running more than being tackled. He ran on the cross country team as a junior and senior, running bests of 17:40 and 16:56, respectively. However, Prep was relatively deep in talent during both years, and Grant was never able to crack into the top seven – which makes his success on the track all the more implausible. It was during his junior track season when he finally hit his stride, running bests of 2:03.9 and 4:33.7. At the State meet, he ran on the winning 4x800 team and finished 16th in the 1600.

Fast forward to this season. Prior to Districts, Grant was ranked in the Nebraska top ten in the 800 (1:57.6, 2nd), 1600 (4:24.5, 1st) and 3200 (9:38.5, 3rd). He's qualified for State in the 1600, 3200 and 4x800. When I met with him, I asked the obvious question: after a relatively unremarkable high school career, how did he improve so much this season? His answer was simple: he finally put in the base

training that was needed to run at a high level. Until this winter, he didn't engage in consistent off-season training, primarily due to a too-busy summer schedule and a lack of motivation. However, after seeing Ryan Eastman and Jack Slagle embark on college careers, he realized he wanted the same. Since the end of cross country season, he's averaged 50 miles per week, 2-3 weight training sessions per week and a weekly speed-development sessions with Prep's sprint coach. It has certainly paid off.

Many of the boys' off-season miles have been run with one another. These four boys are generally quiet, disciplined athletes who enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded people. Head Coach Dan Tietjen believes that boys' individual successes this season are largely due to their tight bonds; in the midst of forming friendships, they also managed to make each other better runners and better people.

I've known all of these boys for three years while I've covered Nebraska high school distance running. Two years ago, none of these four boys would remotely be considered collegiate distance running prospects. As of today, they all are. Leo has committed to St. Louis University, Michael to Creighton and Grant to Mount St. Mary's in Maryland. Luke has yet to commit to a program, but the arc of his improvements over the past three years have been so steep that he will see success in his next phase of running.

Just like their predecessors, the four boys have also served as role models for the underclassmen. Prep has a talented group of sophomore distance runners who hope to follow in their footsteps. Two of those sophomores will run the 3200 at State.

Anything can happen at the State meet, particularly on hot or stormy days. The Prep boys may or may not win a few medals, but they've already gained something greater. Because of ambitious goals, years of friendship, and hundreds of miles on group runs, these four boys have proven that it's never too late to make your mark.

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