

Hannah Ray, Junior, Lincoln Northeast High School

Distance athletes choose the sport for many different reasons, but Hannah Ray's explanation is a bit unique. "My mom wanted me to play a sport in high school, but I wasn't good at any sport I had tried, so I just chose cross country," she said. "Even though I had been on the cross country and track teams in middle school, I really didn't know anything about distance running – how to train, how to race. I was not good when I started" that freshman year.

Fortunately, Coach John Snoozy and a few seniors saw the potential that Hannah couldn't see in herself, and they took Hannah under their wings. She finished her first race in over 23 minutes. Two weeks later, she cut off 90 seconds and placed second at a freshman meet. That medal was the first tangible reward of her running career, and it gave her confidence that she could accomplish even bigger things. Three weeks after that, she placed 5th in a competitive Districts meet that included Lincoln East, Pius, Norfolk and Omaha Burke. Her Districts time of 20:07 was more than three minutes faster than the start of the season. The following week, she ran 19:41 to finish 15th at State.

Hannah didn't let the success at State XC lull her into complacency. She realized that she'd have to work harder if she wanted to keep improving, and she thrives on setting and surpassing goals. She set PRs of 5:36 and 11:51 during her freshman track season, qualifying for State in the 3200. She didn't medal at State, but the environment at Burke was something she wanted to experience again. She committed to a consistent summer running plan, something she hadn't done before her freshman year.

Her sophomore XC season ramped up quickly. She recorded a series of top-5 finishes, including one at the stacked Lincoln Public School championships. She added more confidence, overcoming the self-doubt that she wasn't fast enough to run with the top girls from other schools. She carried that conviction into the State meet, one of the hottest and windiest State meets in years. At the 2-mile mark, she clocked a 12:38 split and was tied with Lindsey Blehm of Lincoln Southwest for 9th place. Unfortunately, she'd been fighting the flu all week. Somewhere in the next half mile, the combination of the flu, the heat and her effort led her to pass out. A few minutes later, she was carted to the finish line, and about 30 minutes after that she was able to walk back to the team tent. It wasn't quite the finish she had expected.

Despite that setback, she continued her consistent training over the winter. She qualified for State in both the 1600 and 3200 the following spring, and then PR'd in both events at Omaha Burke with a 5:19 (11th) and 11:22 (8th). She increased her mileage to 30 miles per week in the summer after her sophomore year, and it paid dividends again. She finished no worse than 3rd the entire cross country season until the State meet when she earned a 6th place medal. That finish was the highest place among Lincoln Northeast girls since Chrystal Steinhauer finished 6th in 1998. She's also the only two-time Northeast medalist in the past twenty years.

Hannah's achievements speak for themselves. According to Coach Snoozy, she is "indisputably the best female distance runner to compete at Lincoln Northeast." Prior to this season, she had established new marks for all of LNE's cross country records as well as the 3200 meter record. When I spoke with her two weeks ago, she told me her next goal was to improve on last year's 5:19 by running a sub-5:15 1600, which would set a new school record. She works quickly. Less than a week after we spoke, she ran a

5:14.1 at the HAC meet to break the LNE record of 5:16.4 record set by Carita Kordik in 1982. Hannah's time is the 4th fastest in Nebraska this season, and her 11:32 is the 10th fastest.

Lincoln Northeast does not have a large cross country program – the girls' team is less than a quarter of the size of some of the other Lincoln high school teams – but Hannah appreciates the bonds and experiences she has with her teammates. She also thinks the smaller roster made it easier for the seniors to mentor her as a freshman. She frequently trains with the Rocket's boys' team, and Coach Snoozy noted that she has always done more than he's asked in terms of training and races. Hannah has also had the opportunity to connect with other Lincoln high school runners through Nebraska Elite's off-season Saturday group runs, and she likes building personal connections with girls she would otherwise only see at races.

As a junior, Hannah is at the point where she's exploring colleges and assessing whether she wants to run in college. She loves her teammates and the constant challenges of distance running, and she doesn't want to regret skipping this unique aspect of college life. However, she intends to pursue an arduous undergraduate degree that will hopefully lead to a medical career, so she wants to be certain that competing in college will be a stress-reliever rather than a stress-inducer. She's trying to embody the advice that she gives to younger runners: "running can be important to you, but it doesn't have to be everything to you."

Hannah is busy outside of her running life. In addition to taking challenging classes to prepare her for pre-med courses, she plays flute in the band, is a member of the National Honor Society and volunteers at the Lincoln Public Library.

Like most competitive high school distance athletes, Hannah works hard to excel in academics, athletics and extracurricular activities. Coach Snoozy calls her a "true student athlete, the best academic athlete that I coach, but she's also exceptionally humble despite her success."

So here we are. The freshman who lacked confidence and was never good at anything - who didn't see her own potential even when others did – seems to be great at everything.

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.