

Ryan Eastman, Junior, Omaha Creighton Prep High School

The Creighton Prep cross country team calls itself the Long Blue Line. For the past 30 years, up to 150 young men run for the Junior Jays each fall, and the JV race field swells whenever Creighton Prep attends a race. This tradition has been enhanced during the last five years as Prep's varsity team has excelled at the state level, and junior Ryan Eastman is one reason why Prep is optimistic about the future of its program.

A failed sprinter

Ryan Eastman is one the leading distance runners at Creighton Prep, but it took several years for him to find success. He first ran as a sixth grader at St. James Catholic School, running the 200 and 400. He describes himself as 'not very good,' but he continued to focus on sprints and jumps through the end of 8th grade. St. James did not offer a cross country program, so Ryan did not begin distance running until he joined the Creighton Prep team at the beginning of his freshman year.

His cross country career began slowly. Freshman at Creighton Prep are encouraged to join a fall sport to accelerate their entry into school community, and Ryan chose cross country primarily because he didn't want to play football. He did not train before the season and struggled to break 20:00 in his first race at the Millard South meet, finishing in 19:45. He showed improvement as the season progressed, briefly earning a promotion from the freshman training squad to the Prep's top squad of 30 runners. He broke 19:00 in his last three races, recording a PR of 18:49. He extended his season by running Junior Olympic races.

He still wasn't fully committed to running when the track season began, but he had enough natural 800 speed that Head Coach Dan Tietjen let him run in a few varsity meets. Ryan began to appreciate that success in distance running is often determined by how much effort a runner gives the sport, rather than by an athlete's talent or size. He also realized that many of his friends in school were also runners, and he enjoyed the camaraderie developed during long runs and hard workouts.

A new commitment

Despite Coach Tietjen's encouragement, Ryan didn't realize he had potential until his sophomore cross country season. Father Robert Tillman, the head cross country coach, told Ryan at the end of his freshman year that he would likely be fighting for one of the last spots on the varsity team in the fall. Father Tillman encouraged Ryan to invest in summer running to improve his chances.

Ryan averaged 25-30 miles per week in the summer prior to his sophomore year, ran harder in practice, and saw quick results. He finished his first race that year in 18:03 and eventually lowered his PR to 17:12. He ran a 17:19 at State, good for 40th and helping Prep to a 3rd place finish. He ran most of the season as Prep's 3rd or 4th fastest runner, far better than Father Tillman had expected.

Ryan carried his enthusiasm and work ethic into spring 2016. He improved his 1600 PR from 4:49 as a freshman to 4:27 as a sophomore, placing 11th at State. He lowered his 800 PR from 2:10 to 2:02, and ran a 1:59 split on the Prep 4x800 team that placed 4th at State.

Ryan ran 35-50 miles per week this past summer to reach 500 miles, and he averaged 45 miles during cross country season. His worst result of the fall season was a still-impressive 16:39 and he lowered his PR to 16:03 at the Rim Rock Invite (KU), placing 7th against a strong field. He placed 8th at State in 16:16, and finished the season with a 15:55 at Nike Regionals.

Training approach

After a two-week layoff following Nike Regionals, Ryan resumed running and averaged 35-40 miles per week by the end of winter training. Since he will focus on the 800 and 1600, he expects his mileage to remain at about that level during the track season. He rarely goes over 50 miles and prefers to limit his long runs to 8 miles, primarily because he tends to accumulate nagging injuries when he puts in too many miles.

His primary training partners this winter have been junior Jack Slagle and freshman James Chapman. Of the three, Ryan considers himself to be the least motivated; he recently worked out for fourteen consecutive days, but only because he had a bet with Jack. Ryan and Jack have been evenly matched in practices and races over the past year, and Ryan gives Jack much of the credit for pushing him to work harder.

During track season, the typical week consists of a long run, a short quicker run, a track session and a tempo run or short intervals. He considers his two most productive workouts to be (a) a ladder of 400, 600, 800, 1000, 800, 600 and 400 and (b) 16 x 400. His favorite workout is a 20-minute tempo run; his least favorite is three or four mile repeats on a hilly Memorial Park route. Prior to Nike Regionals, Ryan and Jack spent quite a bit of time on the track, and Ryan felt that 800 repeats helped sharpen him for the race.

Weightlifting is Ryan's only formal cross-training. He tries to lift twice per week in the winter and three times per week in the summer, and most of the varsity track members will lift twice per week through the end of April. Leg workouts include leg curls and a variety of multiple squat exercises, while arm workouts include bench press, push-ups and dumbbell exercises. If Ryan continues to add muscle and a few pounds over the next year, Coach Tietjen thinks he has a legitimate chance to break Prep's 800 (1:54) and 1600 (4:13) records.

With Prep's high number of cross country runners, as well as at least two dozen distance runners on the track team, Father Tillman and Coach Tietjen attempt to tailor workout plans to equivalent groups of runners. Although Coach Tietjen follows a predictable workout schedule, he welcomes input from all of his runners, and he'll adjust his training plans based on what they say and how they feel.

Like most high school students, Ryan enjoys candy, snacks and fast food but he tries to limit these vices during the season. Despite his mother's disapproval, he continues to eat one junk food item year-round: cheesy Pringles. Ryan considers cheesy Pringles to be his secret power source and he'll eat up to an entire canister 60-90 minutes before a race.

Building on success

Many high schools see the success of their running programs wax and wane, but few schools are able to repeatedly finish at the top of Class A State meets. Kearney, of course, had a historic run with their boys' team winning 123 consecutive track & field invites over 22 years and 11 consecutive Class A state championships from 1994 to 2004. Lincoln Southeast exhibited a similar dominance in cross country, with their girls winning 9 consecutive state titles from 1989-1997 while their boys won 10 state titles between 1984 and 1999. More recently, the Millard West boys' team has four titles in the last nine years, including the past two titles.

Prior to 2012, Prep had found it difficult to put together this type of consistent success, but its fortunes have improved. Prep had four State cross country medalists in the 17 meets from 1995-2011, but it has had seven medalists in the last 5 meets. In the past four years, Prep has won one championship (2014) and finished 3rd three times. Prep also won the 2015 State track meet with points in nearly every event.

There are many factors that lead to a consistently strong team, but Coach Tietjen attributes much of Prep's recent distance running success to TJ Simpson and Jack Polerecky, two vocal leaders who graduated in 2012 and 2013, respectively. Polerecky (now running at Loyola Marymount) mentored John Nownes (2014 XC champion and 2016 3200 champion) and Thomas Doran (2nd in 1600 in 2014). Nownes and Doran mentored John Lukowski and Cole Nelson (all four were on the all-class gold 4x800 team in 2015), who in turn provided guidance to Prep's current juniors and seniors. Coach Tietjen is hopeful that Ryan, Jack Slagle and other upperclassmen will pass on their passion to younger runners so that Prep can continue its success.

Goals and motivation

On the heels of a breakout cross country season, Ryan has heady goals for the next two seasons. He would like to lower his PRs to 1:57 and 4:16 this spring and put himself in position to medal at State in the 800, 1600 and 4 x 800.

Ryan's time goal next fall is 15:25. He will be the fourth fastest Class A returner in cross country, so he's aiming for a Top-5 finish at State. Ryan also is hoping for a top-2 finish as a team. Prep is returning at least three runners from last year's State team, including Jack Slagle (11th) and up-and-coming freshman James Chapman (64th). Prep's team will likely also include Connor Artz (65th), James Townley and Roinan Staunovo, a strong runner who sat out the 2016 XC season due to transfer rules.

Beyond these goals, Ryan would like to challenge Prep's 1600 record, currently held by John Nownes in 4:13. Building on his success from the past year, Ryan is hoping to improve enough over the next year to draw interest from Division 1 running programs. However, he hopes to become a surgeon, so his first priority is to find a strong academic program. He hasn't spent much time yet on his college search, but Notre Dame, Boston College, Marquette, Wisconsin and Nebraska are on his radar.

Beyond school and running, Ryan is on Prep's Quiz Bowl 'scrub team' and Math team, and he was a group leader at Prep's freshman retreat in February. He also plays YMCA basketball, rec baseball and golf.

Put in the time

Dustin Llewellyn of Nebraska Elite TC requested this article because of Ryan's seemingly overnight emergence as a top-flight distance runner. While Ryan appreciates the attention, he is quick to explain that he only found consistent success after a prolonged commitment to year-round training, increased effort during workouts, and hundreds of cans of cheesy Pringles. He's eager to pass what he's learned to the next generation of Prep runners so that the Long Blue Line can be champions again.

Jay Slagle is a volunteer writer for the Nebraska Elite TC website. The father of three teenagers, including a current Creighton Prep runner, 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.