

Hesselbart aiming for 3rd trip to state



All photo credits: Danielle DeFalco

By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — Dalton Hesselbart already has competed twice in the Division II state high school outdoor track and field championships.

The Eastwood senior is working hard to earn a third straight trip to state this season.

Hesselbart qualifying for his sport's showcase event would be the perfect end to what is already an outstanding career for one of the best pole vaulters in school history.

"It would mean a lot being after being there the last two years, and I'd love to get on the podium," Hesselbart said of

returning to state.

If Hesselbart is on the awards podium, he'll have finished no lower than eighth at state.

The top eight finishers in every event at state are recognized on the awards podium and receive All-Ohio honors.

For now, though, Hesselbart is emphasizing daily improvement. He's saving any thoughts of a return to state for later.

Entering this week's district meet at Oak Harbor High School, Hesselbart ranks eighth in Division II with a height of 14-6. The top four finishers at Oak Harbor advance to the regional meet May 25-27 at Lexington High School where the top four finishers, again, qualify for the state meet.

The state championships are June 2-3 at Ohio State University's Jesse Owens Stadium.

"As long as you use every day to get better and do everything right, by the time state comes around, you should be all right," Hesselbart said. "Pole vault is a different event. Finding a pole to jump over a bar at a specific height is very difficult. I try to look at the positives, and I try to learn from the bad and work on it. I try to get a little better every day."

Hesselbart established his personal record of 14-6 April 18 during a dual meet against Rossford. It was the fourth-best vault in school.

He's since cleared 14-0 against Fostoria May 3, 14-3 at the Oak Harbor Invitational May 5 and 13-4 for second place last weekend in the Northern Buckeye Conference Championships.

His goal this season is to clear 15-6, which would break the school record of 15-4 set by Crosby Schemenauer in 2008.

"(15-6) is an unbelievable number, but that's what I'd like to do," Hesselbart said. "I'll work hard to get there."



Hesselbart tied for 11th at state last season with a vault of 14-0, marking just the second time he had cleared 14-0 or higher. The first time came two weeks earlier when he vaulted 14-3 to win a district championship at Oak Harbor.

Hesselbart cleared 13-0 at state as a sophomore when he finished 14th. He also was a three-time qualifier for the Division II-III winter state indoor meet.

“We want to PR,” said Eastwood boys head coach Brian Sabo, who believes Hesselbart “probably” would have qualified for state as a freshman had

the season not been canceled by COVID. “The nice thing about our event is a PR means you’re getting better. Wherever that falls, it falls.”

This season

Hesselbart has vaulted well this season, although his early results didn’t show it. The season’s first three meets saw Hesselbart jump 13-0 twice and 12-0 once before he started to heat up in mid-April. He cleared 13-6 in meets on April 11 and April 15 before vaulting 14-6 against Rossford three days later.

“I’m really pleased with how I’m vaulting because the first few meets, I could barely touch 14-0,” Hesselbart said. “Now, I’m flying over it.

“The pole vault is an event where you have your ups and down, but I’ve been jumping 14-0 consistently lately,” Hesselbart added. “I’m at the point of the season where I have to win if I want to keep advancing.”

Hesselbart cleared 14-0 twice last season, 14-3 when he won a district championship at Oak Harbor and 14-0 at the state meet two weeks later

“I’m trying to be more consistent,” Hesselbart said. “I have too many off and on days. It’s been hard for me to keep everything going smoothly.”

Some of the inconsistency was the result of Hesselbart experimenting with bigger poles and his runway approach early in the season.

“The things we’re putting in place now are going to show results later,” said Eastwood assistant coach Ethan Downey, who shares the pole vault coaching duties with Sabo.

“We’re on poles consistently we’ve never been on. We’re on a consistent run. We’ve had big clearances over bars we might have squeaked over last year.

“You have to be on the right pole for the run and the jump that day,” Downey added. “You might be on a pole one day that might not use again or it might be too small. It’s important to dial up the right pole on the right day.”

Hesselbart has cleared 16-0 using the bungee cord in practice, Sabo said.

“He’s really jumping well,” Sabo said, adding they’ve been working on where to place the standards at the higher heights. “I’d rather have him jumping well, and I’d rather have that than have him just sneak over the bar. There’s a lot of potential left in him.”

Hesselbart declined to blame any of his problems on the adverse weather conditions all track athletes have faced this season. But the weather seems to have finally turned for the best with just three weekends remaining in the season.

“Weather hasn’t had anything to do with any with my vaults. None of the weather has been too big a problem,” Hesselbart said.



State review

In most seasons, Hesselbart would have been on the podium at state last season, but the vaulting at state was crazy good. The top nine finishers all cleared 14-10 or higher. Indian Valley senior David Adams cleared 16-2 to win the event, while defending state champion and Perry senior Javin Richards was second at 15-10.

Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary senior Blake Sifferlin was third at 15-6.

“That was great competition,” Hesselbart said.

Of the top 25 vaults in the state last season, regardless of division, 10 were by vaulters who competed in the Division II meet.

The nine vaulters who cleared 14-10 or better were the most in the Division II state meet, dating back to 2000. The previous high was six in 2014,

followed by five in 2015 and four in 2019. No other year saw more than three vaulters clear at least 14-10. From 2000-2013, only 16 vaulters total went 14-10 or higher.

Also in the span from 2000-2022 a vault of 14-0 would have placed in the top eight at least 13 times.

“If I’m able to compete at state again, the experience of being there before will help,” Hesselbart said. “You know what to expect, what the atmosphere is like, how to handle everything.”

An early start to the vault

Hesselbart’s vaulting career started as the result of a gutsy move, Sabo said. The then fifth- or sixth-grader was in Eastwood’s weight room and noticed several Eagles pole vaulting nearby. He quickly sought out Sabo to ask if he could join the workouts, Sabo said ‘yes,’ and immediately had Hesselbart doing drills. Hesselbart had his own pole shortly after that.

“He was a natural at it early on,” Sabo said. “His height was good. He’s always had a good plant. He picked it up so quickly.”

As a middle schooler, Hesselbart won NBC championships as a seventh- and eighth-grader, and still holds the Eastwood Middle School record of 12-1 set in 2019.

Hesselbart approached Sabo one day after seeing pictures of his dad, Rick, vaulting for Oak Harbor High School. His dad’s PR was 13-6.

“I’ve loved vaulting since the first day I tried it,” Hesselbart said. “It’s the best thing you can do as a kid. It’s challenging and a little bit of an Adrenalin rush. It’s like a thrill when you’re inverted going over the bar.”

Hesselbart thought he would be a baseball player at Eastwood after playing that sport throughout his childhood. He was primarily a third baseman and occasionally pitched.



“My plan growing up was to play high school baseball,” Hesselbart said. “When I tried the pole vault, I switched over to track real quick. I didn’t join track to run. If it wasn’t for the pole vault, I wouldn’t have run track.”

Over the last two seasons, he’s becoming a student of pole vaulting.

“He loves the event,” Sabo said. “He cares, and he always want to talk about technique. It wasn’t until last year that he learned the feeling of the event, to come off the pit and tell you what he thought. Before that, he just vaulted. Now, he can tell you what he felt on a particular vault, what he did well, what he didn’t do well. The better jumpers we’ve had could come off the pit and tell you about their vault.”

Downey agreed: “He really understands the event. I watch him help other kids. I watch him help other teams. He’s a student of the event, and the fact he’s willing to help others is

important, too. It’s great to see him understand it to the point where he can help others. You’ve gone from him being an underclassman where he didn’t have much ownership in the event to where he’s a student of the event now. I feel comfortable he would jump well if none of the coaches were here.”

Hesselbart enjoys watching videos of his vaults and of other vaulters, and he can evaluate his own vaults.

“I’ve learned a lot about the pole vault,” Hessebart said. “It’s a very complicated sport, but I love the challenge of it, and it keeps you from being bored. But I definitely have a love-hate relationship going with the pole vault.”

National Pole Vault Summit

Hesselbart attended the two-day National Pole Vault Summit at the Reno Livestock Arena in Reno, Nevada earlier this year. He attended the event with Brian Sabo and teammate Julia Sabo.

The event was open to all vaulters from youth through senior citizens, who used 15 pits. Instructional sessions were held for parents and vaulters, and the vaulters mingled throughout the weekend and stayed in the same hotel.

“I loved all of it,” Hesselbart said. “I met a lot of the elite vaulters, the 18-foot jumpers, and they were all very nice. The cool thing is they took an interest in our vaulting, asking us our PRs and how we were doing, and they were signing autographs. It definitely made me want to be nicer and more social with others. It was an awesome event, an awesome experience.”

Hesselbart had a chance to watch Brian Sabo vault during the weekend, and adjusted the standards for his coach.



“I loved having that experience with him,” Hesselbart said of Sabo, an All-Ohio Division I vaulter at Canton GlenOak in 1992 when he finished fifth at state. He vaulted collegiately at Bowling Green State University. “I’ve seen pictures of him in college. I love seeing Coach Sabo vault because it’s a younger side of him coming out.”

Julia Sabo is a two-time state outdoor qualifier and a three-time state indoor qualifier. The senior holds the Eastwood outdoor and indoor pole vault records. She and Hesselbart often help each other with their vaulting.

“We’ve been in it together since we started, so we know a lot about each other,” Hesselbart said. “I can read her like a book. We help each other with our vaulting, and it helps things to go smoother. We have each other’s backs, and we can help each other get better.”

Climbing the Eastwood Top 10

Hesselbart would like to move up on Eastwood’s Top 10 list.

Following Schemenauer are Jacob Montag, who cleared 15-0 in 2017; and Ryan McKibben, who jumped 14-9 in 2006. Hesselbart is tied for fourth with Kyle Schlumbohm.

“I’d love to move up on the list, and making to No. 1 would be very nice, but the guys ahead of me were all very good vaulters,” Hesselbart said.



The pole vault crew.

Team leader

Hesselbart is one of Eastwood’s captains, who were voted on by the team’s athletes.

“It’s nice because it’s voted on by my teammates,” Hesselbart said. “It means my peers respect me and look up to me, and they think I’m responsible enough to make decisions

for the team. I'm very social and I try to help out the team as much as I can. It means a lot."

Hesselbart leads with his actions and words.

"I try to lead by example, but I'm never perfect," Hesselbart said. "I try to give the guys some encouragement, something good to hear, maybe a story, to coach them up. "Sometimes, if I hear a coach give them a response they don't like, or say they get yelled at, I'll try to cheer them up, or try to tell them why coach talked to them like that," Hesselbart said. "Some people aren't used to Coach Sabo's sternness yet. I tell them you're not the first or the last, but he's just being stern with you so it doesn't happen again."



More than a vaulter

Hesselbart was a standout on the Eastwood football team last fall. The 6-foot-1, 181-pound defensive end was a third-team Division V All-Ohio selection and a first-team All-NBC honoree.

In track, he competed in the triple jump at the Whitmer Invitational. The triple jump isn't sanctioned by the Ohio High School Athletic Association and is only held a handful of events. But Hesselbart said yes when Nikki Sabo, who coaches the team's jumpers, asked him if he'd be interested in

trying the event.

Nikki Sabo's invitation came the week of the meet, and Hesselbart had two 30-minute practice sessions to learn the triple jump. He jumped 36-9 to help Eastwood finish second in the event. He also ran on the 4x400 relay team at Whitmer.

"It was nice, kind of exciting," Hesselbart said of the triple jump. "It's an event people always want to try, and it's something I wanted to do. I'm happy I did it. I wish we had it at more of our meets because I'd do it more frequently. My shins and knees were sore, but it was a fun event. I didn't do too badly for the first time at all.

"I figured it out pretty quickly, and got the job done," Hesselbart added. "I loved the challenge of it. I've watched a lot of clips of it. When it's executed right, it's an attractive event."

Future plans

Hesselbart is working for Buckeye Tank and Trailer in Millbury after completing his course work earlier this year at Penta County Joint Vocational School where he was in the welding program.

Hesselbart said he'll apply to be a pipefitter in the future, and will work his way up through that program in hopes of becoming a certified welding inspector.