

Downs contributes on and off the track



All photo credits: Danielle DeFalco

By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — Emma Downs already has established herself as one of Eastwood High School's fastest sprinters.

In each of the last two seasons. And ever.

For all of the success Downs has had on the track, the senior has been every bit as valuable as a team leader. She's one of the Eagles' hardest workers, whether it be during a meet or practice, or in the weight room.

The senior also is an outstanding student and brings a ton of positive energy to the team, again, whether it's in practice or during a meet.

"I try to work hard and compete hard every day," said Downs, who finished second in the 100 and third in the 200 during last season's Northern Buckeye Conference Championships. She also helped the Eagles win the 4x100 relay, and finished seventh individually in the long jump.

"You lead by example overall," Downs added "You show your teammates what it means to compete, and to support each other by cheering each other on, what it means to work hard as an athlete by always giving your full effort.

That's the most powerful way to lead."

Even more leadership

The Eagles graduated a senior class which played a large role in the Eagles' winning their 21st straight conference championship last season.

Downs is one of 26 returning letter winners and 55 athletes on the Eastwood roster this season. She's also one of the team's captains, joining classmates Kayden Firsdon, Olivia Newsome and Julia Sabo; and junior Haley Sponaugle. The captains are selected in a vote by the team's athletes.

The Eagles' roster consists of 10 seniors, 11 juniors, 13 sophomores and 21 freshmen.

"I like to lead by example, and that's what last season's seniors did," Downs said.

"People don't take kindly to being told what to do. Examples say more than words. We want this to be fun, and we want to have a family atmosphere.

"If you're not having fun, you're not going to enjoy the season, and people aren't going to come back next season," Downs added. "What's the point of doing something, if you're not having fun?"

Although Downs prefers to lead by example, her coaches said she leads vocally, too, in a positive way.

"She uses her voice all of the time. She's definitely vocal," Eagle assistant coach Nicole Schmeltz said. "She helps people whenever she can. She's very coachable. She's a strong leader. She has a strong work ethic. She always gives a great effort. You can count on her 1,000 percent to give her best effort in everything she does."

Downs also is one of the Eagles' biggest cheerleaders during meets. She's popular with her coaches and teammates.



"She's very positive. She'll go around to the different events and cheer on her teammates," Eastwood head coach Nikki Sabo said. "She also leads by example. You give her a workout, and she's going to do it to the best of her ability. In a meet, she gives her best effort and shows the younger athletes, this is how you compete, how you go after it. She's in the weight room after school. You can't ask for anything more from her."

"She's very kind to everyone on our team," Schmeltz said. "She tries to include people in everything."

Stronger and faster

Downs joined the Eagle program for her sophomore season and immediately started working out in the weight room.

"The weight room helps me with explosiveness, speed, strength, agility, so many things," Downs said. "The track coaches are in there, so we can work on specific things." Downs had never lifted weights before joining the track program.

"I knew that was an area I wanted to work on," Downs said, praising weight room coaches Andy Friess and Brian Sabo for the success of the school's strength and conditioning program. "I've seen it in other people how it can improve your performances when you're in the weight room."

Downs said her soccer play also improved because of the weight room. The midfielder was a second-team All-NBC selection in the fall.

"I was kind of scared, a little overwhelmed by the weight room at first because it was all new to me, having never lifted before," Downs said. "Now, I'm comfortable in the weight room. Everyone makes you feel comfortable. It's such a welcoming place. They don't pressure you. I love it now."

Looking ahead

Downs already ranks third on Eastwood's all-time outdoor list in the 100 (12.84) and 10th in the 200 (27.12), and she's striving to run a personal record in both this season. Both Top 10 times came last season.

"I want to continue to grow and get better," Downs said. "That's going to get me where I want to be. I want to be consistent and focused on my training every day. Every little bit counts and giving it my all every day."

Downs enters the outdoor season after setting the school indoor record in the 60-meter dash and running the second-fastest indoor time in the 200. She ran 8.38 in the 60 and 29.13 in the 200.

"Everything is going great so far," Downs said. "I feel really good where I'm at right now."



Downs will be an important member of Eastwood's sprint relays. During the indoor state meet, the 4x200 team of junior Saylor King, sophomore Lilly Mullholand, junior Kyrie Henline and Downs finished 19th in 1:55.69 — the sixth-fastest time in Eastwood history.

"A lot of the events are all on you, so you have to push yourself to do your best," Downs said. "I can't rely on anybody else in the 100 or 200. It's all on me to do my very best.

"I love the relays. That is the team aspect of the sport, but you still want to do your best for the team," Downs added. "I usually like the relays more than the open events. You're running for

your teammates, so the entire team can do well."

Downs has a PR of 15-6½ in the long jump where she's also hoping to PR. She has an indoor best of 15-7, fourth best in Eastwood history.

"She's willing to ask questions," Nikki Sabo said. "When she first came to us, right before her sophomore year, she came to indoor practices. She was trying the long jump, and it was totally new and different to her. She's very coachable. She asks questions, she's very coachable, and will immediately try to implement changes in technique or form. Sometimes, people are hesitant when something is new or different, but she would always try. I really appreciated that."

Downs is overflowing with confidence entering this season.

"She's an example of how the weight room can help you," Nikki Sabo said. "Her times as a junior were much faster than her sophomore year. She lifted all summer and all winter."

Downs is learning to take care of her legs after dealing with shin splints the last two seasons.

"My legs feel good right now, and I know I have to take care of them," Downs said.

"We have to make sure we protect her legs, make sure she's fresh in May," Nikki Sabo said. "It's something we have to monitor as the season goes on."



A fast start

Downs enjoyed success as a seventh grader, winning the NBC championship in the 100, finishing second in the 200 and running on the runner-up 4x100 relay team. But she didn't compete in track as eighth grader because of shin splints and to concentrate on soccer. Her freshmen season was canceled because of COVID.

She returned to track as a sophomore, finishing third in the 100, fourth in the 200 and running a leg on the first place 4x100 relay

team at the NBC meet.

"I hadn't thought of running track again, but after seeing what the program was like, I was really curious and decided to give it a try," Downs said. "I've ended up loving it. I love our positive and encouraging environment, and our team atmosphere. I love how competitive it is. I love to compete. But I also love having fun and how encouraging the whole environment is. I've never seen anything like it. Everyone is encouraging you and cheering you on, to do your best."

But the adjustment to running again after a three-year break wasn't easy.

"I felt kind of clueless," Downs said. "I didn't even know which foot was my takeoff foot. It was like starting at square one. It was fun starting at square one because I had never been in a sport where I learned all new things and had to learn how to do everything. Now, I have a passion for track."



Seeking another NBC title

The Eagles are striving to win their 22nd straight conference championship. They've won all 10 NBC championships after winning the final 11 championships in the Suburban Lakes League. The NBC meet is May 14 at Otsego High School.

"Our goals are to win NBCs, be focused and disciplined in our training every day in the preseason because that's will make us our very best for NBCs and districts," Downs said. "We need to lift weights, and continually develop our speed and strength."

Downs is looking forward to seeing how the Eagles progress as a team during the season after losing a quality senior class.

"That's why we have new people who need to step up and be role models," Downs said. "Underclassmen, as they get stronger and older, they'll be scoring those big points for us. I'm excited to see what we can have from our freshmen class, too. I really like our team, and I'm excited about the season."

Future plans

Downs will attend Bowling Green State University in the fall and major in early childhood education. Her goal is to become a teacher. Her degree will enable her to teach pre-school through the fifth grade. She's a member of Eastwood Student Council and One Step Ahead.