

On a whim, Firsdon discovers success in the 800



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By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY – Kayden Firsdon didn't run an 800 until the last regular-season dual meet of her sophomore season.

She's quickly emerged as one of her team's best runners in the event.

In slightly more than one track and field season, the Eastwood High School senior has parlayed her speed and endurance into a spot in the lineup.

Firsdon runs the open 800, and is a member of the 4x800 relay team after she first competed in her newest specialty May 4, 2021 during a dual meet at Elmwood High School.

She ran a time of 2:52.11 that day and has since lowered her personal best to 2:31.84, a

time she posted during the Division II district meet at Oak Harbor to advance to the regional at Lexington High School.

She remains one of the Eagles' best 400 runners.

"She came up and asked if she could run an 800," said assistant coach T.J. Tuttamore, who works with the middle distance and distance runners. "She stepped on the track and ran 2:52, and I was like, 'I can you use you.'"

How it happened

Firsdon was a 100, 200 and 400 sprinter as a seventh- and eighth-grader, and during her sophomore season. Her freshman season was wiped out because of COVID.

Her best event was the 400 where she finished fifth in the NBC meet as an eighth grader. She helped the Eagles finish second in the 4x400 relay and third in the 4x100 that season.

"She took a different route to get where she is now," Eastwood head coach Nikki Sabo said. "She was a really good 400 runner in middle school. Her sophomore year, we had a lot of 400 runners, and she wasn't running the times she did in middle school and was getting frustrated."

Firsdon's background as a defender on the Eagles' soccer team already had provided her with a great base of endurance.

"She's a defender, so she's constantly running, and, on a whim, she asked if she could try the 800," Sabo said. "I said, 'Sure,' and she ran really well."



You could tell she was trying to find her niche; where do I fit in on this team and how can I help this team?"

Even more impressive was Firsdon's first 800 was run with no practices at that distance. The 800 is two laps around a 400-meter track.

"The drive to do something new and to do something new for the team, and just for myself. It seemed like a good opportunity," Firsdon said of why she decided to try the 800. "I knew I had a good amount of endurance, so I thought I could do it, and I thought it would be fun to do as a new thing."

Her only preparation was asking the team's 800 runners at the time what

running the distance was like.

"I loved it, but I had no idea of what I was getting into, except that I was running two laps instead of one," Firsdon said. "I knew nothing about the pacing in the race, but the coaches said I could do it.

"I had so much Adrenaline then. I didn't feel as bad as I thought I would and I feel even worse now when I run the 800," Firsdon added. "My legs and lungs were feeling it, but it was a good feeling to know I did it, and I was able to do it at a decent time and effort. I've loved it ever since. It puts me to work. It gets me moving and active. It's a really good fit for me."

Firsdon joined Eastwood's middle distance and distance runners full time last season.

"I felt like I was a mediocre sprinter. I wasn't super slow, but I wasn't top notch," Firsdon said. "With my body, I know I can build speed up at a longer distance. I can't go super fast out of the blocks. I felt that's why the 400 and 800 are better for me than the 100 and 200.

"The 800 has both speed and endurance, I think I have both," Firsdon added.

"I'm able to build up speed, and I have endurance."

Firsdon can still run the 400 when needed.

"Her speed has gotten better," Sabo said. "She's back to those times she used to run. She has endurance, and her confidence is better. She works hard in the weight room, like a lot of our athletes do."



Success as a junior

Firsdon's fourth-place district finish last season earned her a regional berth. She posted a regional time of 2:35.19 to finish 13th. She also finished fourth in the NBC meet where she had a time of 2:36.11.

"That was really exciting. I couldn't believe I finished fourth," Firsdon said of the district meet. "That was a big step for me because it was a completely new race for me. I couldn't believe I made it that far. I was really happy I made it that far, and I'm hoping I can get back there this year."

A week after the conference championships, she lowered her PR at the district meet by almost five seconds.

"I learned trying new things is something I'm really good at," Firsdon said. "I'm always will to try new things, and I'm always willing to do whatever it takes to help the team and for

myself individually. If you put yourself outside the box, outside your comfort zone, great things can happen."

Firsdon's goal this season is to run as fast as 2:27-2:28. She's already been clocked in 2:34.9 and 2:35.5 in the 4x800 relay, and 2:31.5 in her 800 leg of the distance medley relay at the Whitmer Invitational April 6.

"I felt really good about our three to four weeks of practice before we had our first meet," Firsdon said. "My times are better than the end of the season last year. Seeing my times are already there is really eye opening and really good, and makes me even more excited for the season."

Firsdon is hoping to lower her time in the 400 to 62 or 63 seconds. Her PR is 68.54.

"I love the 800 and that's my goal, but I still want to push myself for the 400," Firsdon said.

If Firsdon can reach a time of 2:27 in the 800, she'll be close to cracking the school's all-time Top 10. A time of 2:26.28 is need to make the list.

"My goal is to be in Top 10," she said.

Firsdon has improved as she learns how to run the 800.

"Two laps at that speed is crazy," Firsdon said. "After the first lap, that next 200 to 300 meters, it's time to push yourself."

Tuttamore calls that part of the race "changing gears."

“The more and more you tell yourself, as you’re running, to keep doing that, the better you get each time,” Firsdon said. “If you tell yourself and your body, it’s time to put it into full power, you can feel yourself changing gears. “Each 800 gets better. It puts you in a better mindset to push yourself,” Firsdon added. “It’s a hard race. Being able to do that makes me feel good about myself and what I can do.”

Even more running

Firsdon almost became a first time 1,600 runner this season. The Eagles needed a fourth runner for the 4x1600 relay at the Liberty-Benton Relays March 31, but the meet was postponed because of inclement weather.

The team of Firsdon, sophomore Leah Emch, and juniors Z Ramsey and Haley Sponaugle were aiming to break the school record of 22:35.77 set in 1998 — tying it for the third-oldest remaining record in Eastwood history.

“She was like let’s go, and she gives the group confidence,” Sabo said.

Firsdon is part of the Eagles’ deep and talented stable of middle distance and distance runners. The group is self-motivated and self-driven, running hard in every meet and practice workout.

“We push each other to get better, and we all get along well,” Firsdon said.

“We appreciate having the sprinters, jumpers and throwers cheering us on when we’re doing a hard workout in practice. That helps us get through that workout. It helps us to keep pushing.”

Firsdon enjoys running the 4x800 relay — the first running event in most meets.

“The 4x8 can set the tone for the entire meet,” Firsdon said. “If you run well in that race, you’re going to run well in your other races. It can help the team by providing some positive energy early in the meet.”

Firsdon first remembers running as a second grader during field days at Luckey Elementary School where she was a relay teammate of Julia Sabo. Firsdon and Sabo, who is a senior, are two of the captains on this year’s track and field team.

“People ask me why I run so much, and it’s always been a thing for me,” Firsdon said. “I’ve always been a runner.. I enjoy it. I enjoy the competition. (The field days) started it all, and it’s led me to where I am today. I couldn’t be happier.”



Kayden & Julia at Field Day



Setting an example

Firsdon is one of the team's captains.

"She's a positive leader, Sabo said. "She leads by example. She's super coachable. She will do what the team needs. She doesn't shy away from a challenge."

Firsdon was a soccer captain last fall. The other track captains are Sponaugle, and classmates Emma Downs and Olivia Newsome.

"I love the captains," Firsdon said. "We get along great and

work together great. I want people to see me as a workhorse and someone who will push other people to work and give their best effort in practices and in meets. If you're not working hard in practice, you're not going to work in a meet. Both need to have the same amount of energy

"I want to make sure everyone on the team feels welcome," Firsdon added. "That's a big thing for me. I don't want to be someone who is too intimidating to talk to. I want to bring positive energy to practice every day. I want to be a person people can go to about anything."

The captains for the track and soccer teams were selected by a vote of the athletes on each team.

"It means a lot to be voted a captain, a great honor," Firsdon said. "I always worked try to be a captain. We had great leaders in the classes above me, and I've always tried to be a leader for people my age and younger, especially those who were younger. Everyone knows going into a high school sport as a freshman can be intimidating.

"Hopefully, people see me as someone with a personality they can relate to and come to," Firsdon added. "It means a lot to hear the positive things people say about you, and it means a lot that they respect you. It makes you feel good knowing you make other people feel good."

Getting in shape

Firsdon said she's in the best shape of her career. In addition to the track workouts, she's a regular in the Eastwood weight room. She praised the work of weight room coaches Andy Friess and Brian Sabo for her conditioning.

Firsdon also has worked with a personal trainer for the last “couple of years.” Her personal trainer is Zach Lewis, who works out of the Lucas Country Recreation Center. He also works with the men’s basketball team at Lourdes College where Firsdon will play soccer in the fall.

“She’s very determined,” Tuttamore said. “She attacks anything she puts her mind to. Her effort level is high in everything, and she’s a competitor. Her fitness level is above and beyond what it was last year.”



Photo Credit: Firsdon Family

Future plans

Firsdon, who has a 4.0 grade-point average, will major in physical therapy at Lourdes. Her goal is a career as a pediatric therapist.

Firsdon will play forward at Lourdes after playing defense at Eastwood. She said she’s played forward in club soccer.

Firsdon was a first-team all-district and all-conference selection in soccer last fall. She earned first-team honors as a sophomore, and second-team recognition as a freshman as a junior.

“It won’t be completely new because I was more of a forward in club soccer,” Firsdon said. “I’ll play wherever they need me.”

She’s also a member of One Step Ahead at Eastwood.