

Julia Sabo aims for big finish to impressive career



Most photo credits: Danielle DeFalco

By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — Julia Sabo is striving to enhance her already impressive résumé this season.

The Eastwood High School senior is a two-time Division II state qualifier in the pole vault, and is the two-time defending district champion at Oak Harbor and the two-time defending Northern Buckeye Conference champion in her specialty.

Sabo also holds the school and conference records in the event.

“I definitely know I’m starting in a better place than where I was at last year,” said Sabo, who recently signed to vault collegiately at Eastern Michigan next season. “Knowing I’m better than last year, I have to take that as a positive and build on that.”

Sabo was a three-time qualifier for the Division II-III state indoor championships in the pole vault, and holds Eastwood’s indoor record in the event.

Success from the start

After Sabo’s freshman season was canceled because of COVID, she had immediate success, setting the school record in only her fourth varsity meet. She cleared 10-7 April 9, 2021 at the Whitmer Invitational to break the record of 10-6 set by Elise Wolf in 2014 and matched by Allison Abke three years later.

She later increased her record three times that season — to 10-9 at

the Napoleon Invitational April 17, 11-0 at the NBC meet May 15, and 11-6 at the state outdoor meet where she finished fourth June 5.

“Her attention to detail is very good, and a lot of that has to do with her gymnastics background,” Eagle assistant coach Ethan Downey said of Sabo, who is a member of Eastwood’s gymnastics team. Downey works with the vaulters. “Gymnastics is a sport that is very detail oriented, and it rolled over into her vaulting naturally. She’s always been receptive to coaching.

“I thought she’d be good at pole vaulting because I knew what quality of gymnast she was,” Downey added. “She had the physical attributes then, and I thought it would be a pretty easy transition for her then. I could see that in middle school, and she’s been very successful.”

Sabo finished 11th at the state outdoor meet last season and fourth in the Division II regional at Lexington High School. Her best vault last season was 11-0, a height she cleared five times. She was second in the regional as a sophomore.

Sabo set the Eastwood indoor record of 10-6 in 2022.

Bouncing back

For all of the success Sabo’s had, she’s attempting to bounce back from what she termed a “challenging, difficult and frustrating” junior season. Most of her issues were health related, primarily an iron deficiency. She said her health is improved over last season, thanks to dietary changes, and she believes she’s on the right track this season.

Sabo jumped 10-6 three times during the winter indoor season this year, and her spring outdoor practices have gone well.

“We’ve done a lot of things better,” Eastwood boys head coach Brian Sabo said of his daughter. He also coaches the vaulters. “She understands the vault even more. Our drills are a lot better. Our mindset is a lot better, especially in the pole vault. If you’re understanding the vault better, it’s going to be better.

“We’re way ahead of where we were at this point last year,” Brian Sabo added. “There are a lot of things set up to have big jumps, and it could go quickly, and she could PR (personal record) by a foot plus in one meet, simply because one thing clicked that we were working on drill-wise and feels right.”

Julia Sabo added she’s working on her mental approach. She’s also one of the team’s best sprinters.

"My training, knowing how last season went, I knew I needed to fix that because I don't want another season like last year," Julia Sabo said. "I want to get better and change how I was training, getting my iron levels up, how I prepare for meets, taking care of my body and my health, and going at it differently this year."

"She's worked really hard during the offseason," Downey said.

Her primary goals this season are to match or better her PR of 11-6, and to be on the awards podium at the state meet. The top eight finishers in each event at state are recognized on the awards podium and receive All-Ohio recognition.

"We learned more about what techniques I need to practice and some basic drills for me to get back to how I originally was," Julia Sabo said. "I'm definitely in a better place mentally this year."

Julia Sabo trained during the winter at Shawn Beamer's pole vault facility in Bellevue.

"I knew everything had to be different mentally and physically. I knew I had to have more fun and not let it stress me out as much," Julia Sabo said. "I care how I do, but I can't let it take me down."

"My friends and family have helped keep me motivated," Julia Sabo added. "They're very positive, and that keeps me going. I know I can be that good again. Watching videos of my sophomore year when I PR'd and had success. I watched the video when I set the record the first time over and over, and I miss that feeling. I'm striving for that feeling again."



Running at Jesse Owens Stadium

Home away from home

The outdoor state meet has been Julia Sabo's home away from home. She first visited Ohio State University's Jesse Owens Stadium when she was 1- or 2-years-old. She was there with her parents, Brian and Nikki Sabo, who were coaching their athletes at the event.

The Sabos took Julia on the track, the day before the two-day state meet. The day before the state meet is a day when coaches and athletes can walk the track and check out the facilities.

"It was a little crazy, taking her with us; you forget how long of a day it is," Nikki Sabo said.

The Sabos still have a picture in their basement from the day their daughter was running barefoot on the OSU track.

"It was cool to think some day she might be down there some day," Nikki Sabo said. "She's earned her way down there for two years so far."

The 2021 Division II state meet was held at Pickerington North High School, due to COVID. The three state meets were held separately at high schools in suburban Columbus. Last year, all three state meets returned to Jesse Owens Stadium.

"It was really cool to compete there," Julia Sabo said. "I love the atmosphere there competing, and I loved watching the running events in the other divisions. There were so many people there watching, but I didn't notice when I was jumping. It was great to watch the meet; just an

amazing experience and just amazing how great everyone is there."

Julia Sabo's first official trip to Jesse Owens Stadium came when she qualified as a junior.

"It was a really cool moment, being her sophomore year, coming off her not having a freshman year," said Nikki Sabo, who is Eastwood's girls head coach. "(The COVID year, 2020) really hit her extremely hard because she was finding things out before anybody else, being a coach's kid, hearing my husband and I talk, and not being able to say anything. That was really rough on her, being her sport. To have her qualify for state as a sophomore was a big thrill."

Nikki Sabo watched her daughter compete at state in 2021 since she didn't have any other athletes qualify for state. During Eastwood's meets, Nikki Sabo coaches the long jumpers and is making the rounds of the other event areas. She only sees a few of her daughter's vaults at most meets.

"State was the first competition I had really watched all year, and that was pretty exciting," Nikki Sabo said of watching her daughter finish fourth with a school-record vault. "It's always a thrill when anybody makes it to state, but it was pretty cool when it was your own kid."

An early start

Sabo started vaulting as a sixth grader. Coach Downey had her try the event when she was coming to Eastwood's winter indoor practices. Shortly after that, Brian Sabo ordered his daughter her own pole.



8th Grade

"I made little jumps at first, and kept working at it, and I kept vaulting at the indoor practices," Julia Sabo said. "I liked it, but I was more neutral towards it."

Julia Sabo admitted she wanted to be a long jumper before switching to the pole vault.

In the NBC middle school meet in the pole vault, Julia Sabo tied for third as a seventh grader and won the conference championship as an eighth grader. She then continued to fare well in high school, although her varsity career didn't start until her sophomore year.

"The people around me when I first started, especially vaulters like Allison Abke, really helped me," Julia Sabo said. "They were so uplifting, and that made me like it even more." Abke remains tied for second on the Eagles' all-time outdoor list. She's a substitute teacher in the Eastwood district this year and is coaching the vaulters on the Eagles' middle school team.

"I never pushed her to vault. It was coach Downey who started her vaulting," Brian Sabo said. "I never wanted to force her or push her to do anything. It seemed right because of her gymnastics background. We did some drills here and there, but anything has to come from the kid,

whether it's my daughter or any other athlete. There was to be an internal drive to get better. And then, we, as coaches, are there to guide.

"When she was a freshman, at the state indoor meet, some things were starting to click, but we couldn't jump after that," Brian Sabo added. "I thought she would be pretty good at it then, and, as a sophomore, she was getting better, and really seemed to enjoy it and was getting better at it."

Julia Sabo cleared 9-6 at the state indoor meet as a freshman in 2020.

She's become a student of the event.

"Even though last year wasn't the year she wanted, she was still watching videos, and noticing things," Brian Sabo said. "She took ownership of the event, or what she should be doing if we (the coaches) weren't right there."

"Things started to click my junior year," Julia Sabo said. "I felt I knew what I did wrong, what I needed to fix, without having coach Downey or my dad telling me. I could watch the videos, and I was like that was good or I needed to work on that. I became a student of the event. That's nice, knowing I can figure it out on my own because the coaches aren't always going to be around."

Brian Sabo also praised two-time state boys outdoor qualifier Dalton Hesselbart for her success. He's also a senior this year.

"We often work things out together, figuring out what we need to improve or what we need to change," Julia Sabo said.

Julia Sabo said losing her freshman season to COVID was difficult. The 2021 indoor state meet was wiped out because of the pandemic.

"That was really hard because I love track and field so much," Julia Sabo said. "I wanted my freshman season, and losing it made you appreciate everything even more. It took some time to get back into it from a technique standpoint, but everything came back fairly quickly. Everyone had the motivation to get back into the sport they lost. Everyone wanted it."



Brian & Julia Sabo, Dalton Hesselbart, Ethan Downey at Jesse Owens Stadium

National Pole Vault Summit

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

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

"It definitely taught me to have fun with vaulting again, especially after the season I had last year," Julia Sabo said. "It was fun to see everyone pole vaulting, just pole vaulters and how they interact. Just knowing the fun part of vaulting of why I like it and why I do it. That helped me mentally with how I train now.

"Watching the elite athletes was really cool," Julia Sabo added. "We got to talk to them to one-on-one. Staying in the same hotel was cool, and seeing the elite vaulters as normal people. You know they were really cool, elite athletes."

Brian Sabo vaulted that weekend.

"That was cool watching my dad jump," Julia Sabo said. "It's something we have as a bond, something we can do together. Watching him vault made me more motivated, too.

"I hadn't vaulted in a while, but vaulting with her was fun," Brian Sabo said. "It's something we can do together, and I enjoy that.



More than a pole vaulter

Sabo will contribute in the 100 and the 200, and the sprint relays. She already ranks fifth all-time outdoors at Eastwood in the 100 with a time of 12.93 and sixth in the 200 with a time of 26.64. Both times were run in 2021 when she helped Eastwood run the ninth-fastest time in school history in the 4x200 relay.

Sabo, who is still recovering from a winter ankle injury, qualified for the state indoor meet this year in the 4x200 relay. However she was unable to run because of the ankle injury.

Sabo is one of Eastwood's captains.

"She's an extremely hard worker," said Eastwood assistant coach Nicole Schmeltz, who works with the sprinters. "She does the little things. She's someone we can count on to use for demonstrations, to relay information to

people. She's a phenomenal athlete, and she's special because she helps immensely in our field events with the pole vault. She knows what her strengths are and uses them

"There are some people just naturally gifted, and when they put the work in, it all comes together," Schmeltz added. "She is really going to learn how to put a full race together."

And Schmeltz is looking forward to a big season from Sabo.

"She had some health things she was dealing with last year, and I'm really excited to see her figure those things out," Schmeltz said. "She battled through them last year, and she's doing better in that. I'm excited to see her excel in her senior year.

"She has become really resilient when things don't go her way, to show you have to bounce back," Schmeltz added. "She's worked hard on that. Showing people that is a great way to lead because that's a hard skill to learn."

As a captain, Sabo leads by example and vocally, whether she's on the track, off the track or in the weight room. She's one of the team's biggest cheerleaders and is always visiting the different event areas to encourage her teammates when she's not competing. She has one of the loudest voices on the team and is easily heard during a meet.

Sabo brings a ton of positive energy and a terrific sense of humor to the team. The coaches use her to demonstrate drills during practice.

“Julia has improved a lot in terms of her being a really vocal leader as well,” Nicole Schmeltz said. “She makes sure everyone is in a good mood. She has her little funny comments that she makes, and I always appreciate that. She’s always in a good mood in practice.”

Sabo and the Eagles are looking to win their 22nd straight conference championship this season.

“You can’t be satisfied. You have to strive to keep improving,” Julia Sabo said. “We’re going to step up and make sure everyone is having fun and improving. If we want to keep this streak of league titles going, we have to keep working and push each other to improve, do the workouts we need to do. We’ll make sure everyone feels like a part of the team.”



A family affair

Track and field is a family affair with the Sabos having the chance to coach their daughter. Brian and Nikki Sabo were track and field teammates at Bowling Green State University where they met.

“It has its good and bad factors, but I know when I’m done, I’ll be glad I had them as my coaches,” Julia Sabo said. “But there’s definitely sometimes, I feel I’m treated a little differently. But I know they’re always around, and I love having them at my meets. They’re always supportive of me. It’s been enjoyable. It’s an experience I’ll always be happy that I had, and I’ll always look back at it fondly.”

Julia Sabo enjoyed growing up around a program that has had success during the regular season, and at the league, district, regional and state levels.

“I knew this program was always really good, and I know a lot of people value my parents,” Julia Sabo said. “I can say, ‘Yes,

those are my parents,’ and that’s really cool.”

But living in the same house as your coaches presents challenges.

“It can be hard coaching her, but it just depends on the moment,” Nikki Sabo said. “But I’ve learned to say I’m talking to you as your coach, I’ve learned to say I’m talking to you as your mom. Sometimes trying to figure out which person to be can be hard, but I’ve enjoyed every moment of it.”

Nikki Sabo admitted she even thought about resigning as the girls head coach several years ago. “My husband said, who will coach Julia?” Nikki Sabo said. “I’m glad I did stick it out. It has been a lot of fun. It’s also easier in a sport where there are stopwatches and tape measures because it’s pretty objective, not subjective. That makes things easier when you have to put lineups together and make decisions.”

All three Sabos have strong personalities, and that’s led to some differences of opinion in the pole vault between Brian and Julia. But with Downey coaching the event, too, he can be a buffer between Julia and Brian — even though Brian Sabo and Downey are delivering the same message and instructions.

On meet days, Downey does most of the coaching in the event, and Sabo concentrates on coaching the boys team.

“It helps having coach Downey,” Julia Sabo said. “Hearing a different viewpoint like coach Downey is good mentally. What he says is the same as my dad, but with my dad, I still hear my dad talking, but it’s a little different when it comes from coach Downey.”

Julia Sabo joined her parents as All-Ohio outdoor honorees.

Nikki Sabo, the former Nikki Litz, was a two-time Division II All-Ohio long jumper at Perkins. She finished fourth in the Division II state meet in 1992 and fifth in 1993. Brian Sabo pole vaulted at Canton GlenOak, finishing fifth in the Division I state meet in 1992.

“Sometimes it’s frustrating, but it’s allowed us to connect over something we both like,” Brian Sabo said.

“The frustrating part is you don’t want to fail as the coach, and the hardest part is separating dad and coach sometimes, and which is which. Sometimes, I have to tell her, this is dad talking, and sometimes I have to tell her this is coach talking. I wouldn’t treat her any different than any other vaulter. But it’s been really fun, and the same with my wife coaching track, having something you connect over and can talk about.”

Brian Sabo also enjoyed coaching his daughter at state.



"Everyone around me would say I was a nervous wreck at state," Brian Sabo said. "I wanted to provide her with the best chance to succeed and not leave any stone unturned; that I was the reason something didn't go well that day.

"The neatest part was watching her succeed and anyone else who came to watch her, watching them watch Julia compete," Brian Sabo added. "I really enjoy watching her and (coach Downey) work together, watching her and other athletes interact, or watching the people who have come to watch her compete. I wanted to see her place."

Future plans

Sabo, who has a 3.7 grade-point average, is undecided on a major at Eastern.

At Eastwood, she's a member of One Step Ahead, and has taken the yearbook and broadcast journalism classes. She can be seen taking pictures and videos at various Eagle events.

"I love yearbook, and I love taking pictures," Julia Sabo said, adding her first experience with the camera came last year during a baseball game. She praised English teacher Kristy Pioterek and Danielle DeFalco for her love of broadcast journalism and photography. DeFalco's pictures from Eastwood sports can be viewed on her Facebook page.

"I really liked Dani's photos and I really like Mrs. Pioterek," Julia Sabo said. "Taking pictures is a lot of fun and I like going to games. The broadcast journalism, I like asking questions. It got me out of my comfort zone, anchoring, watching our videos, editing segments."

Sabo has been active in Eastwood's senior spirit group.

"Our senior class has tried to push everyone being at the games and having fun again," Julia Sabo said. "Our spring season was canceled as freshman, so we couldn't go to games, and our sophomore year, it was limited attendance. We wanted to step up and show how fun games can be, and involve more students. It's been a lot of fun doing that. The response has been great."



Julia with Danielle DeFalco