

Eagles excited about the return of the Eastwood Relays

By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — The showcase event for Eastwood High School's track and field program is ready for a comeback.

The 47th Eastwood Relays return Friday night for the first time since 2018.

The relays were canceled the last two seasons, the result of the COVID-19 pandemic last year and severe weather in 2019.

The relays are popular within the program and the track and field community because of the great competition offered, and the amenities and atmosphere offered to everyone associated with the meet.

"It'll be exciting and fun," Eagle girls head coach Nikki Sabo said. "We're really looking forward to it. Whenever you get to host a big event at your stadium, it's a good thing, especially now that they've lifted some of the (COVID-19) restrictions.

"We should have more fans there. The kids love running in front of fans. They love running at night, running under the lights. It's just a fun atmosphere, a fun experience for everyone involved."

Joining Eastwood in the 12-team meet are: Anthony Wayne, Bowling Green, Cardinal Stritch, Clay, Findlay, Liberty-Benton, Napoleon, Saline (Mich.), Southview, Start and Whitmer.

The field events begin at 4:30 p.m., followed by the running events at 5:30 p.m. If there are seated events, the shot put will be held at 4:15 p.m., followed by the start of the seated running events at 5:20 p.m.

"It put a damper on the last two seasons because it is something all of us look forward to," Nikki Sabo said of not having the event the last two seasons. "On the girls side, winning the Eastwood Relays is one of their goals. It's winning the NBCs (Northern Buckeye Conference) and then the Eastwood Relays are right underneath. It's very important to them."

Only four Eagles, all seniors — Jamie Lahey, Connor Oberhouse, Reagan Sheets and Paige Woodruff — have competed in the relays. All four were freshmen when they took part in the meet in 2018.

"It's a weird feeling to know we haven't had the Eastwood Relays in three years," Eagle boys head coach Brian Sabo said. "I'll just be excited for the kids to be able to compete. I'm really excited to see just how many people come out to see a big meet. We've had great community support in the past."

The weather forecast for Friday, according to The Weather Channel, calls for sun and clouds with a high of 61 degrees and a low of 45, and 13 mile per hour winds. Despite the approximate five-inch snowfall earlier this week, virtually all of the snow had melted by the time the Eagle girls and boys teams practiced Wednesday afternoon.

"Something out of my control is almost the most important thing," Brian Sabo said. "It's the one thing I stress out about more than anything else."

'An unbelievable experience'

Brian Sabo's goal for the meet is to "create an unbelievable experience" for the athletes with the great competition, the great amenities and the great atmosphere. Many of the amenities are aren't featured during dual/tri meets, or during other large invitationals.

“We want to create an unbelievable experience for the kids, and we want to make it like the state meet for the kids who won’t necessarily qualify for the state meet and just not for our kids,” Brian Sabo said. “It happens to be at our place. We try to do a lot of special things that everyone benefits from, but mainly for our kids. Other teams are here, too, so they get to benefit, and that’s great.”

“We really pride ourselves on making this a great event for everyone,” Brian Sabo added. “We try to make it a celebration of track for everyone involved ... the athletes, the coaches, the fans, the officials and our entire community. We’re lucky to have a lot of people who help us with putting on the event.”

The meet crowns a total program champion, determined by combining each school’s boys and girls points. The champion and runner-up will receive an Eastwood Relays banner. The combined championship started in 2018. The combined champion receives a banner.

“We really have a combined program, and there are a lot of schools that have a combined program,” Brian Sabo said. “I thought it would be cool to have a combined championship, something different and something to bring some camaraderie between the guys and the girls teams. I thought our kids would really like it, and there are other programs who take a lot of pride in having a combined program.”

Amenities

All coaches and athletes on the championship and runner-up teams will receive medals, and the top five individuals in each event will receive medals. The top five finishers in each event will score points for their team.

“We’ve had some great, great events, and the fourth- and fifth-place finishers have run a great time and not placed,” Brian Sabo said. “Now, they’re rewarded. For another \$100, \$200, what’s another medal? I like hearing the kids medal clank around as the meet goes on. That’s really cool.”

For the fourth time, Jesse Squire, a Bowling Green State University graduate and announcer at area high school and college meets, will interview event winners in the mix/media zone. The interviews will be streamed live on Facebook or YouTube.

The top five finishers in each event will receive their medals and have their picture taken. At many invitationals, the awards are placed in a brown paper or plastic grocery bag and handed to the coach after the meet to distribute.

“They put a lot of effort into making the athletes feel appreciated and special. That’s a big, big deal,” said Squire, a BGSU track and field teammate of Brian and Nikki Sabo.

“Any time you can make the athletes feel like they are being treated very well, that their efforts are appreciated, that goes a long way. Even just a little bit of that will keep kids motivated for a long time. When athletes are excited, it shows.”

The extras also can help a meet when the weather isn’t perfect.

“Even on a night when it can be cold and wet, instead of thinking I can’t wait to get home and get out of this (weather) and get dry clothes on, you’re thinking I can’t wait to get back here next year and do this all again,” Squire said.

Bringing a meet alive

Among the other extras at the meet:

- The Eastwood facility has a timing board near the finish line. and performance boards at every field event. Jumbo lane markers are used at the starting line.

- The athletes are promoted at the start of each event.

The coaches are asked in advance to provide information about who their top athletes are and what their accomplishments are. Public address announcer Mike Godfrey then reads that information when he introduces each event.

The promoting of the athletes will be tougher this season because last season was canceled.

“That’s the unfortunate part; we won’t have as much to share what they have done coming in,” Brian Sabo said. “We can acknowledge the higher entries, the top times and distances in an event coming into the meet.

“We’ve come to realize most fans want a lot of information about what is going on,” Sabo added. “Just getting information to the fans really brings a meet alive, and we want to recognize the athletes from every school.”

- Sabo is hoping to have baskets at the starting line for the athletes to put their warmups and other belongings. Meet workers then take those baskets to the finish line for the athletes.

“We’ll see if we have the people do that,” Sabo said, adding COVID-19 protocols also require the baskets to be wiped down after they’re used. “I feel like we can wipe them down quickly if we have enough people.”

- The meet will utilize two pits in the pole vault, two high jump pits and two discus rings. The two discus rings will help speed up the that event, allowing the hammer throw to be held. The hammer isn’t sanctioned by the Ohio High School Athletic Association, although an unofficial state championship is held the day after the state meet.

But the expansion of the meet to 12 teams has caused the elimination of the triple jump because Eastwood only has one long jump runway, Brian Sabo said.

- There are 12 running events and six field events in the meet. The meet is a mix of individual and relay events.

- Seated events (shot put, 100, 400 and 800) have been held in the past, but Brian Sabo said he hasn’t been contacted by any seated runners who wish to compete Friday.

The seated events were added in 2016. Many meets don’t have any seated events. And some that do have just one athlete from the host school. Although Eastwood has no seated athletes, the meet often has multiple competitors in each event. Those athletes usually are from different areas of the state, not just Eastwood and its surrounding area. Sabo said he’s willing to have seated events if he’s contacted by those athletes this week. The relays use Fully Automatic Timing, which is required for qualifying for seated events at the state meet.

- Live results of the meet will be available on the Internet through www.baumspage.com.

- Officials will receive gift cards again this year as an additional appreciation to those who work the meet.

Eagles assist as workers

The Eastwood athletes who don’t compete in the relays will serve as meet workers.

“They help make the atmosphere what it is, and their help is so greatly appreciated,” Nikki Sabo said. “They’ll do jobs they’ve never done before to give it that big meet feel with our lane markers and things like that. Their help is very beneficial, and we hope they enjoy being out there and supporting their teammates in two roles.” The Eagle coaches and athletes also help run Eastwood Middle School’s home meets. The middle school coaches and athletes assist with running of the home varsity meets.

Getting the meet ready

The Eastwood coaching staff has been busy this week, giving the Freedom Field facility an overall sprucing up. In between the projects, they’ve coached their teams. Eastwood has 57 girls and 50 boys on its roster.

“What our coaches do for this meet is great,” said Erik Fertig, a 2019 Eastwood graduate who is throwing collegiately at the University of Louisville. “The meet has an unreal atmosphere. The energy during the meet really fires you up to compete and do your best.

“This meet is a lot more special than most of our meets,” Fertig added. “It definitely feels like a big-time meet. It has a professional feel to it, and we love competing in it.”

Not always a destination event

But the Eastwood Relays weren’t always a destination event. The meet had dwindled to just five teams in 2009, the competition wasn’t great and the extras were few.

“It wasn’t a very good meet back then. We needed a change or it was going to get worse,” Brian Sabo said.

The Eastwood coaching staff visited the U.S. track and field championships later that year. When they returned, the staff made a list everything they wanted to do to improve the Eastwood Relays. The Eagles have been crossing items off that list and adding to it ever since.

The Eastwood coaches use ideas they see at other high school meets, as well ideas they see at other college and pro events.

Now, the meet has a waiting list of schools that want to participate, including some schools that left because they weren’t happy with the meet a decade ago. Eastwood emailed many programs in Northwest Ohio to see if they were interested in coming. The meet was moved up a week and to a Friday night, instead of the traditional Saturday afternoon.

“We emailed them and told them what we were going to do, and it’s paid off,” Brian Sabo said.

Sabo said the meet could expand to as many as 16 schools in the future.

“That will depend on how this year goes,” Brian Sabo said. “If it doesn’t take up a lot more time, I could see the meet going to 16. It depends on how the meet flows. Does it make the meet go on so much longer? I wanted to give it a shot. A 16-team meet brings in more money. It’s grown and grown, and we want to keep making this meet better and better in any way we can.”

Squire is a distance runner who came to BGSU after running cross country and track at DeVilbiss High School in Toledo.

“The meet is well organized,” said Squire, who can be followed on Twitter at @tracksuperfan.