

Team always comes first for Sutton



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By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — Eastwood High School's girls track and field team was striving to build depth in the shot put for its two meets during spring break.

The Eagles discovered their depth from an unlikely source — pole vaulter Piper Sutton.

The senior originally was skeptical of the request from head coach Nathan Howard, but she quickly embraced the challenge of becoming a first-time thrower in a difficult and technical event. She fared well,

throwing at least 30 feet in three of her seven competitions, and at least 29 feet in two other meets.

She finished with a personal record of 30-11 April 14 during a tri meet at Genoa, a mark that would have made the finals of the Northern Buckeye Conference Championships.

Sutton has since returned to pole vaulting only to protect her surgically repaired knee. She's already jumped a PR of 9-6 this season, tying for the eighth-best height in school history. She finished fifth in the conference meet with a jump of 9-0.

"I laughed when Mr. Howard told me he wanted me to throw because pole vaulters don't do throwing — you don't see that combination very often," Sutton said. "Then, Mr. Howard said it again and it became real. I said, 'OK.' I didn't have very high expectations and I didn't think I could do it, but it was what the team needed. I always like trying something new, and it would be fun to try a new event."

The Eagles were short-handed in the discus and shot during spring break over the first week of the season because of vacations. But Sutton accepted the challenge to help her team.

"I just had a hunch — she's a pretty strong and athletic person," Howard said why he chose Sutton for the shot. "I didn't expect her to be quite as good as she was, though."

The 5-foot-7 Sutton was an All-Ohio soccer honoree last fall, and played basketball her sophomore and junior seasons before the knee injury forced her to give up basketball this season.

"I really wasn't surprised at all that she would try shot put for us," Howard said. "She's a team-first person, and I think that she enjoyed the challenge of learning something new. It's part of the ethos of what we're trying to build with our team identity, not being afraid to try new things and potentially fail. To have a senior lead by example helps to reinforce what our team stands for."



A quick learner

Sutton stepped out of her comfort zone and quickly succeeded in her new endeavor, throwing the shot almost 29 feet during the team's intrasquad meet in late March.

She then 30-0 threw in her first official meet April 2 at the Liberty-Benton Relays, helping the Eagles finish fourth in the event. Sutton finished ninth individually. Most of throwers she was competing against had been throwing since the seventh grade.

"My first goal was to throw 22 or 23 feet and the first couple times I threw, I thought maybe I have a chance to be decent at this," Sutton said. "I heard 30 was a pretty good throw, but I wasn't sure."

Sutton threw at least 27-5½ in every meet. The Eagles also finished third in the event at the Whitmer Invitational April 10 with Sutton finishing ninth individually.

Liberty-Benton and Whitmer scored the field events as relays.

Each school could enter up to three athletes in an event, with the combined distance or height being used to determine the order of finish.

"I have no regrets," Sutton said. "It's my senior year. With my knee, I had a feeling running wasn't going to be as strong for me as it was last year. I was able to do something else besides pole vault and help the team, and I'm always willing to try something new and I'll always remember this."

Sutton was a sprinter when she joined the high school program, but two knee injuries took their toll on her speed. Her sprint events have been limited since.

"Being very coachable and having the willingness to try new things helped her be successful in the shot," said Eastwood assistant coach Tyler McCrory, who works with the throwers.

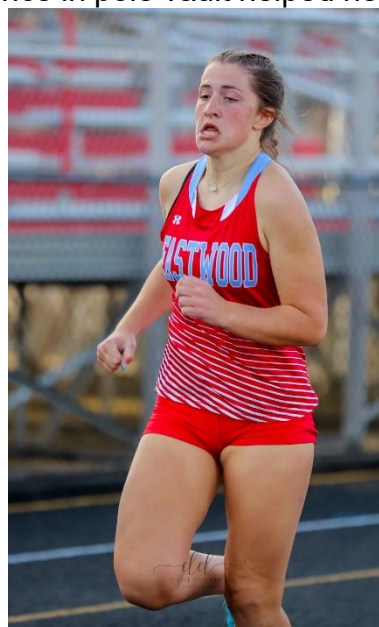
McCrory added her explosiveness and her speed helped her in the throwing ring.

"The shot is a technical event and, oddly enough, her experience in pole vault helped her in shot," McCrory said. "Her attention to detail, and understanding the importance of getting yourself into good positions to excel in such a technical event are some key things that carried over from pole vault into her approach to shot."

Two events at once

The challenge of throwing the shot and pole vaulting was even more difficult because the two are usually held simultaneously at the start of a meet. As a result, Sutton was going back and forth between the two.

"It was really hard to balance the two," Sutton said. "It was hard because I was going back and forth and missing warmups, so it was hard to be consistent. But I was still able to score in both, so it was worth it. I sort of felt out of place in the big events in the shot."



“It was crazy, but my coaches and teammates were helpful, letting me where to be and when,” Sutton said. “It was hard sometimes for me to get comfortable, but I just gave it my best and I kept reminding myself I hadn’t been at it for very long. I never expected to come along like I did.”

Sutton even joked she was proud of her success because she didn’t compete in the shot with throwing shoes as she competed in her regular running shoes.

“I really appreciated the support of my teammates and coaches,” Sutton said. “They were really positive and encouraging, and that helped me so much. They also kept track of my events and made sure I knew where I had to be and when.

“Piper did a great job managing her time between the two events, and her willingness to put the team’s success as the top priority greatly contributed to her ‘no problem attitude’ to approaching both of these events at the same time,” McCrory said

Sutton also had a not-so-secret weapon involved in her success — her boyfriend Hunter Lauer, who just happens to rank fifth on Eastwood’s Top 10 in the shot with a throw of 54-6½ earlier this season. The senior also ranks fourth all-time in the discus with a distance of 171-6 earlier this season.

Lauer won both events in the conference meet.

“He’s certainly helped a lot,” Sutton said. “He’s been a good extra coach for me.”

Sutton said Lauer, at first, thought she was joking about becoming a thrower.

“Once he realized I was serious, he said we need to start practicing, and he told me what to do,” Sutton said. “He was really supportive and helped me when I was really nervous. He said give it your best every throw.”

Following their initial conversation, Sutton and Lauer immediately headed to Lauer’s home where he has a throwing ring in the driveway.



“We went out that night and I threw a couple in the driveway,” Sutton said. “He knew what to tell me and what I needed to do, He gave me a lot of tips because he knew what to do because I never understood all of the phrases the throwers used. I had no clue about the lingo, but he broke it down, so I would understand it. He took a lot of time to help me.”

I’m still a pole vaulter, too

Sutton has jumped well this season, including the 9-6 vault during a tri meet April 7 at Eastwood. She’s jumped 9-0 five other times in a season that, at times, has been marred by rainy, chilly and windy conditions — hardly ideal for the pole vault. “I feel like I have a big jump coming. It’s definitely NBC meet last season with a vault of 9-4 and eighth in the Oak Harbor district at 8-6.

Her goal is hit the 10-foot mark by the end of the season. Hitting the mark would put in a three-way tie for fourth on Eastwood’s all-time list.



“Piper has been extremely solid all season,” said Eastwood assistant coach Ethan Downey, who works with the pole vaulters. “She has constantly been in the nine-foot range, often attempting PRs, since the beginning of the season.”

“We’ve been working on my form and all of the little things, especially my steps and my plant,” Sutton said. “I want them to be the same every day. Sometimes, my knee gets in the way. It hurts some days, but I’ve gotten a little more consistent. Sutton has been vaulting since middle school. She won the NBC as eighth grader, clearing 6-6. “It always looked fun and my friends said you should try it, but I was tiny in middle school,” said Sutton, who was just 5-0 tall in middle school before growing to 5-7. “I did it in middle school, but I was

out my whole freshman year. I almost didn’t come back to it after I was hurt because I thought I’d be terrible at it.”

Injuries slowed her during her freshman and sophomore seasons, but she returned to form as a junior.

“Last year, I stepped back in it and got my PR of 9-4 at NBCs,” Sutton said. “I was enjoying it again and just to get back to that point where I was earlier, and it was still fun. It’s my favorite and it was something different compared to my other sports.

“I liked it right away, but it was really hard,” Sutton said. “That’s part of the reason I liked it right away – it wasn’t easy. I would get frustrated, but it was fun and I wanted to keep getting better, and I was having fun with it and it was something different. “

Overcoming multiple injuries

Sutton said she entered last fall’s soccer season with a sore knee that began bothering her during the summer. She played in all 20 of the Eagles’ matches, totaling 34 goals and 14 assists to earn all-state recognition.

Sutton worked with Eagle trainer Tony Costello during the season in an attempt to stay healthy. Immediately after the season, Sutton had a Magnetic Resonance Image and learned her meniscus had been “shredded.”

She had surgery in late November and was cleared to run a week into the track and field season. She still wears a brace to protect the knee.

“It probably wasn’t the best choice to keep playing soccer, but it was my senior year and soccer is my favorite sport,” Sutton said.

The Eagle soccer team finished 13-3-4 overall and third in the NBC with a 3-1-2 record, losing in a Division IV district final.

“Piper dealt with a lot of pain throughout the fall season,” Eastwood soccer coach Julie Cross said. “I’m pretty sure I didn’t always know exactly how much pain she was in, but I also think that she got used to it and just wanted to play her senior season more than anything else.”



Sutton said she usually told her coaches her pain level was a 4 on a scale of 10, and they would respond by asking if that was a Piper 4 or a normal person 4. She accepted her all-state award on crutches at the All-Ohio banquet.

She also changed positions from a center midfielder to an attacking forward to reduce the amount of running she had to do.

“I wanted the team to succeed, so I pushed through everything,” Sutton said. “Accepting my award on crutches reminded me it was all worth it. The whole team was switching for me, so I had to hold up my end of the deal. I definitely put a lot of pressure on myself.

“Being all-state was a big goal for me,” Sutton added. “I remember when my knee was hurting in the middle of the season, it wasn’t going to happen because I didn’t think I would be able to finish the season, not that was my only

goal, but it was in the back of my mind.”

As a center midfielder, Sutton played a major role on defense and helped start the offense, meaning she had to cover the entire field. But as an attacking forward, she was still involved offensively and could rest when the Eagles didn’t have possession.

“She was able to consistently be involved in the attack, with some additional rest time when we didn’t have possession,” Cross said. “Piper’s understanding of the game allowed her to determine when she could chase down a ball played into space, and when she could disrupt an opposing team’s counter attack.

“We managed the number of miles she put on herself at practice and in games,” Cross added. “She became almost like an assistant coach at times in practices, helping run drills, and looking for specific things we were working on from the sidelines. Piper knew how important it was for her to continue being a leader, especially with the knowledge of the game she brings.”

Sutton also has succeeded in track this season, even though she’s less than six months removed from her knee surgery.

Sutton also broke her femur, dislocated her knee cap and tore part of her MCL during a freak accident of a club soccer match during the winter of her freshman year. She missed almost all of her freshman track and field season, although she returned to run the 100 in Eastwood’s season-ending junior varsity invitational. Sutton also broke her arm in middle school.

“First of all, you can ask any coach that she’s ever had, and I think that they’d all agree that she’s a pretty tough athlete,” Howard said. “I’m guessing her pain tolerance is a bit

higher than most other kids at our school. Secondly, she's very competitive, which means that she's willing to put in the work in the weight room to get back to competing."



Two-sport captain

Sutton is a track and field captain this season after serving as a soccer captain during her junior and senior seasons.

"Piper cares a lot about the sport of track and field and takes her role as a leader very seriously," Howard said of why Sutton was selected as a captain in a vote of her teammates. "She tries to build connections with everyone else on the team, and they know that they can rely on her to be a great

teammate."

The soccer captains also were determined by a vote of the players.

"Piper has always been a natural leader in the way that she plays and the effort she puts into getting better and competing," Cross said. "She is a leader by example, and her teammates have always looked up to her because of her knowledge of the game of soccer.

"Piper was voted a team captain both of her junior and senior seasons and proved to be extremely deserving," Cross added. "During her last year, she began to lead in a different way because of her situation. She began to take on new roles in practices to explain drills, help others see things that she saw, and took an encouraging role when she was sidelined and not able to practice or play. It was awesome to see her embrace the difficult circumstances, while continuously finding new ways to lead and improve her team."

Sutton has enjoyed being a captain in both sports. Being a track captain has been even more challenging since the team has 55 members.

"My biggest thing is leading by example," Sutton said. "I don't like to be the person who gets on people unless you really need to. The most effective way to get people to follow you is to do the right thing and encourage them to come with you. If they see you working as hard as you can, they'll want to follow that. We try to set the standard really high, and have people rise up to that.

"I try to make it a point to talk to everyone on the team, but it's hard on a team this big," Sutton added. "It doesn't have to be super serious. I try to sit at different tables before our practice meetings every day and go to the various event areas and cheer everyone on, or asking people at the meet how did you do today? I want



everyone to feel included as a member of the team because it's no fun to left out. That really helps to bring out the family culture.”

Sutton enjoys being a role model: “Being a captain, especially on our team, is a really high honor. You know there a lot of people looking up to you. It’s really cool to know you have that impact because you know someone is always watching, especially with the underclassmen. I remember what it was like when I was a freshman and how nervous you were. Being able to ease the nerves and being the person people can go to is a really good feeling.”

What’s next

Sutton will attend the University of Toledo in the fall and major in Engineering. She’s planning on pursuing a career in civil engineering.

“I’m thinking about kind of design job, maybe designing buildings and bridges, but I’ll figure that out once I start doing some co-ops,” said Sutton, who has a 4.2 grade-point average. In addition to track and field, and soccer, Sutton also is a member of the National Honor Society, Key Club, Pep Crew and One Step Ahead. She’s also been in the Leadership Development Class taught by Howard and Eastwood boys head track and field coach Brian Sabo, and she’s active in CedarCreek Church.

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