



### **By Kevin Gordon**

GENEVA — Jaden Rayford was impressive during his first major competition in two years.

The Eastwood senior finished second in the long jump with a personal-record distance of 21-3¼ at the Division II-III state indoor track and field championship at the SPIRE Institute.

Rayford finished as the runner-up by only one-quarter of an inch to Galion sophomore Hanif Donaldson. Donald's winning mark came during the final attempt of the sport's showcase event.

Rayford's PR was part of an outstanding day for the Eagles, who posted 13 individual PRs, and PRs by the 4x200, 4x400 and 4x800 relay teams.

"I'm really happy with the way today went," said Rayford, who has been hampered by injuries throughout his career. He suffered a season-ending knee injury last season April 5 at the Whitmer Invitational on his first run-through attempt.

"This is revenge for the injury," Rayford said. "I've put that behind me, and my goal is to get back to where I was. I wanted to prove myself today."

Rayford's outdoor best is 21-8½ at the Northern Buckeye Conference meet when he was a freshman, earning him second place. His last big meet came when he was a sophomore at the Division II district meet in Oak Harbor which was his only meet of that year.

The top eight finishers in each event at the state indoor meet earned All-Ohio honors and were recognized on the awards stand.

"I'm happy because he's healthy," Eastwood boys head coach Brian Sabo said. "You can tell he's really powerful right now and to get over those demons of being hurt, he seized an opportunity and took advantage of it."

Rayford qualified for the finals by less than two inches. The University of Toledo football recruit had a best 19-11½ on his first attempt of the prelims, and that remained his best until his second attempt of the finals.

The athletes were divided into two flights for the prelims where they received three jumps. The top nine distances advanced to the finals where the athletes had

three more attempts to improve their mark. Rayford then took the lead before Donaldson won.

In the finals, the athletes jump in the reverse order of standing, starting with the ninth-place jumper.

“I could feel this jump coming,” Rayford said. “I knew I had it in me. I told myself I could do it, and I did.”

He fouled on his other two jumps of the finals and on his second attempt of the prelims. His other prelim jump was 15-9.

“It’s nice to have Jaden back with confidence and going after big jumps,” said Eagle coach Nikki Sabo, who works with the team’s long jumpers. “He knew after each what he needed to do to adjust for the fouls. After he snuck into the finals, he knew it was time to go after a big jump.”

Rayford qualified for state March 1 with a mark of 20-7 at the University of Akron, three inches shy of his best. His mark of 20-7 was 18<sup>th</sup>-best among the state qualifiers.

His performance was even more impressive because he hadn’t practiced the long jump at all, although he remained active as a member of the Eastwood basketball team.

“That was huge for him to play basketball. That really helped him,” Nikki Sabo said. “They were doing plyometrics every day with rebounding and shooting drills. That’s what is so important about multi-sport athletes. Running down the (long jump) runway six times is no big deal when you’re running up and down the basketball court for four quarters in games. Today was good for him mentally going into the outdoor season.”

The Eagles have had limited outdoor practices the last two weeks, but start full practice for the outdoor season Monday. Eastwood’s first outdoor meet is March 31 in a three-team meet at Clay. Bowling Green also will compete in the meet.

“Having not practiced at all makes me even more excited to show what I can do outdoors with practicing,” Rayford said. “I’ve never jumped 21 (feet) indoors, and it only gets me excited for what I can do outdoors. I’m prepared and motivated. I’m ready to go for outdoors.”

## **RELAYS**

### **4x800**

The 4x800 team of junior David Russell, sophomore Cory Jay, and seniors Montgomery Kramer and Lucas Coffman had a PR of 8:48.78, lowering its

previous best by more than six seconds. The Eagles' previous best was 8:54.82 a week ago.

Eastwood finished 19<sup>th</sup> in the race.

"I'm really proud of the way we ran," Kramer said. "Coming into the race, we were a little antsy and nervous, but I'm really happy with the way we ran. It was a lot of fun."

"We all got out strong, and all of us were pushing as hard as we could," Coffman said. "We ran well last week, but we knew we could run even faster today."

Russell, Jay and Coffman all had PRs on their legs, and Kramer just missed a PR by two seconds after covering the first 400 in only 60 seconds.

"We're looking forward to the outdoor season. This gives us confidence, and we can build on what we've done so far," Kramer said.

"The training has been good, and this sets us up nicely for the outdoor season," Coffman said. "We've had a ton of PRs, so when we get to the outdoor season, the confidence will be soaring."



#### **4x200**

The 4x200 relay team of sophomores Ethan Kwiatkowski and Jake Limes, and seniors Logan Wendt and Nate McCauley-Benner posted a PR time of 1:37.49, lowering their previous best of 1:39.99 a week ago.

Kwiatkowski, Wendt and McCauley-Benner had individual PRs on their legs, and Limes was

two-tenths of a second shy of a PR. Eastwood finished 20<sup>th</sup> in the race after qualifying 23<sup>rd</sup>.

"We were great. It was nice to come out with a good time," Kwiatkowski said.

"We approached today that if we run hard, we'd have a good time. It doesn't matter what place we get as long as we run hard. We're proud of each other.

"We knew we could easily beat (last week's) time," Kwiatkowski added. "Today was a good race. We're ready for the outdoor season, and we're in a good mind-set. We're excited and confident, and we're looking forward to improving even more."

## **4x400**

The 4x400 team of Limes, Russell, Kramer and McCauley-Benner blistered its previous best with a 3:39.43 clocking — down from 3:50.91 last week. All four runners had a PR during their leg of the race. The team finished 15<sup>th</sup> after qualifying 21<sup>st</sup>.

“We really did well. That’s a good performance,” Russell said. “We were a little tired having run earlier in the day. I didn’t think we’d PR by that much, but I knew we’d run a faster time. What a good day. We were going to go out and run as hard as possible and leave everything on the track, and we did that. We put everything we had into it and had good results.

“This is a really good start going into outdoors,” Russell added. “We’re already running fast times, and we’re three weeks before our first outdoor meet. We’ve gotten a lot of good training in. It’s a good start. We’re excited about the outdoor season.”

## **HURDLES**

### **Wendt just misses PR**

Wendt failed to qualify for the 60 hurdles final, despite a time of 8.76 — only .05 shy of his PR.

The top two finishers in each of the three preliminary heats and the next three fastest times advanced to the finals. Wendt was 12<sup>th</sup> during the prelims.

“The start was all right,” Wendt said, “I hit one or two hurdles with my trail leg and that upset me, so I started tearing it up at the end. It was an all right race. I was pleased with it, even though I didn’t make it to finals. I’m still satisfied. I really feel good going into outdoors.”

## **MORE FIELD EVENTS**

### **Steele posts PR**

Junior Mason Steele had a huge PR in the weight throw with a distance of 44-4¼ to better his previous best of 42-10½. He finished 14<sup>th</sup> ranking 18<sup>th</sup> among the state qualifiers.

The weight throw is indoor track’s version of the hammer throw.

“I came in knowing I might not be the best one here, but I was going to work hard and give it my best, and then cheer on my teammates,” Steele said. “I’m so excited for the outdoor season. I’ve been working out and practicing to get ready

for it, and I have great competition at my own school, so I'm ready to see how the season plays out. It's going to be fun."

In the triple jump, freshman Bryce Koprowski-Kistner was 14<sup>th</sup> at 36-7.

Koprowski-Kistner's previous best was 37-9¼. His competing in the triple jump for the third time and the state mark was his second-best distanced of the season.

"I'm disappointed because my goal was a PR, and I didn't accomplish that,"

Koprowski-Kistner said. "But this was still a good experience, being a freshman.

I'm happy with my indoor season and I'm looking forward to building on that."

Also in the triple jump, senior Trey Tuttamore fouled on all three of his attempts.

"Today really wasn't great, but we'll build on it and get better for outdoor

season," Tuttamore said. "The indoor season gets me ready for outdoors. It helps

you get in a groove, so you don't have to jump into everything so quickly. I'm

looking forward to outdoors."

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Brian Sabo was thrilled with the way the Eagles performed at state to finish the indoor season.

"We told them before the meet we're not going to judge anyone by

performance," he said. "We're going to judge them on what your mind-set is

coming in, do you really give great effort and go after a PR? That's what we're

looking for and the rest will take care of itself. If they didn't PR today, they really

went after that, and I appreciate and respect the heck out of that. That's who we

are.

"I couldn't be happier with the group, the way they treated each other, the way

the guys and the girls treated and supported each other," he added. "It makes me

excited to get everybody together and continue this outdoors."