

## Eagle boys strive to be successful again



*Photo Credit: Tammy Schmeltz*

**By Kevin Gordon**

LUCKEY — Eastwood High School's boys track and field team has plenty of new faces this season.

That's all right with the Eagles.

Eastwood likes its youthful roster after last season was canceled, the result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Eagles have graduated two senior classes since they last had a meet during the 2019 season.

The last time the Eagles competed, this season's seniors and juniors were sophomores and freshmen,

respectively. The sophomores had a handful of practices as freshmen and the freshmen didn't have an eighth-grade season.

Just five of the Eagles' 49 athletes have competed in the Northern Buckeye Conference Championships, four last season and one in 2018.

"I love what I've seen so far," said Brian Sabo, who is starting his 10<sup>th</sup> season as the team's head coach. "The main goal was to create a team dynamic of guys getting to know each other, and guys they're going to trust in scoring points for them. Guys are going to cheer each other on, support each other, know who is in event each event. The better our team culture gets, the better we're going to do."

### **Do I know you?**

The Eagles' have been switching the order of their warmup lines in each practice each day, so the athletes will meet their teammates more easily.

Sabo asks the athletes to introduce themselves to one person during the warmup and ask them the question of the day. The question might be their favorite food or restaurant, or their favorite music.

Athletes are then called upon to share the name of the person they met and their favorite of the day was.

"It's a way to try to get to know each other and create a little discussion," Sabo said. "We've asked the guys how things are going and they say it's going really well. There are a lot of new faces we don't know, but the environment is going really well. It's positive. We're getting to know more and more people every day. We're cheering each other on during practices."

Sabo asks his older athletes to learn the names of as many of their teammates as possible, and asks the captains to know the name of every athlete on the teams.

The team's captains are seniors Mason Steele, Conner Oberhouse, Zach Kwiatkowski, Gage Might and David Russell; and junior Cory Jay.

“We’ve got to work all the way down to the freshman because we count on them, and they’re our future,” Sabo said. “We always talk about planting trees we’ll never see grow. You see them this year, but then you leave, and they’re still here for 2-3 more years, hopefully.

“Hopefully, you can look back at results or come back to a meet and say, ‘Wow that kid was a freshman and now look at him,’ little things like that in their event area, help out the younger guys or talk to them more,” Sabo added. “We hope, if our older guys pour into the younger guys, then the younger guys will think well of you when you leave and that’s what we want. That’s just the start of it.”



*Photo Credit: Tammy Schmeltz*

### **Teaching, teaching, teaching**

With a young team, Sabo said the coaching staff is more teaching than it would be with a veteran team. The Eagles are striving to win their 20<sup>th</sup> straight conference championship, spanning the Suburban Lakes League and the NBC.

“We have to be constantly teaching,” Sabo said. “You can’t assume they know anything with the situation we’re in, and we have some kids who have never run track. We teach all of the time, and they’re getting a lot of reps (repetitions). The key is patience. They’re going to make mistakes because they are young. They’re going to make mistakes and we’ve told the kids that’s OK.

“We want to see you try what the coaches ask you to do,” Sabo added. “We know there are going to be some failures. So what? You’re not going to get better by not doing what the coaches asking you to do.”

The youth, Sabo said, should lead to a ton of improvement and learning. Eastwood opens the season

March 30 when it hosts Oak Harbor. The team’s first big invitational is just two days later at Liberty-Benton.

“I would think we’ll see a lot of improvement and progress because we’re so young, that’s the exciting part,” Sabo said. “We’ll have our ups and downs, but we’ll see times drop and distances will keep going up in the field events. And it’s exciting to celebrate it with them.”

Before competing against Oak Harbor, the Eagles will hold an intrasquad meet to help the team see what competing in a meet is like.

“I’m really excited to see where they’re at because it’s going to be pretty good,” Sabo said. “My favorite part of all this is you get to see how good of a coach you are when you have a young team. There is talent there, but when you’re young and only have five people competing in a league meet before, you better be able to coach, and you better be able to make to develop your athletes. I feel like we’re doing a lot of teaching. We’re still trying to develop and build confidence. That’s my favorite part because you usually see a lot of growth. That’s what makes it exciting.”

## **Depth**

Sabo believes the team will have excellent depth, that could lead to the Eagles having separate 4x100 and 4x200 relay teams, and perhaps different sprinters in the 100 and 200. He also likes the team's overall speed and its quality of distance runners.

The depth is important, Sabo said, because many of the Eagles' haven't competed in the big invitationals.

"One of our goals, too, is to put out a team that can compete and win meets, and get as many guys as I can involved in the meet as I can just because we have so many who have not," Sabo said. "When we get to league and district, I'll tell them we have to put our best out there. But I'll give a lot of opportunities in these big meets to a lot of different kids. We get to provide them an opportunity to show what they can do. If so many do well, we'll continue with it. But I would love to give many guys an opportunity to compete."

Russell returns after finishing third in the 400 in the NBC meet in 2019, while Jay was sixth in the 3,200, and Jake Limes ran the 100.

Also in the 2019 NBC meet, Russell was a member of the winning 4x800 relay, and Limes and Ethan Kwiatkowski ran on the 4x200 relay team which finished third.

Senior Dylan Jump competed in the 100 during the 2018 NBC meet.

"We like what we see. We're collectively faster than a year ago," Sabo said. "Guys who we were counting on last year are a year older, a little bit faster. We have a lot of guys around the same speed. That's important. That could give us some depth in some relays.

"The distance guys have had great workouts," Sabo added. "We're a little thinner there than we have been in the past, but I like what I see. I love what are guys are doing and how they're working. They're running some really good times. "

## **Winning the NBC**

The Eagles have won 22 of their last 23 conference championships, sweeping all eight NBC titles after winning the final 11 championships in the now-defunct SLL. The SLL morphed into the NBC, with Fostoria and Gibsonburg taking the place of Lakota and Gibsonburg.

"We've talked about it already," Sabo said. "That's our first goal as far as end of season type stuff. Win the league and then get as many people to regionals and then state as you can.

That's always been a goal. We set that and then go back to now and work on the how and why we get to that point."

Eastwood hosts the NBC May 15. The Eagles then compete in the Division II district meet at Oak Harbor May 20 and 22.

"It would mean something to this group after having it canceled last year," Sabo said of winning 20 straight conference championships. "But we don't look at it as being the team that could lose the streak. If we go and we compete and gave great effort, listened to the coaches, and we failed at times because it was great effort or you tried something the coaches asked and failed, and you just got beat by another team, then you just got beat.

"We're either going to win or we're going to make it exciting and make somebody else better," Sabo added. "You can let the competition make you better. You can get energy from good competition, but you can only control you and the team can kind of control each other by feeding off each other. We don't fear losing. We'd rather attack winning. We'd rather go after performance."

