

Eagles thrilled to be back at the track



Photo: Danielle DeFalco

By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — Eastwood High School’s track and field teams are back home at Freedom Field. The Eagles finally are practicing again. They’re enjoying the camaraderie of their teammates and the team’s family atmosphere.

Excitement is quickly building for the team’s first meet March 30.

Social distancing requirements and masks are a constant reminder the COVID-19 pandemic isn’t over, but the Eagles are thrilled to be running, jumping and throwing again after their 2020 season was canceled shortly after practice began.

“It feels really good to be throwing and being around the team again,” said junior Ava Kiefer, who competes in the discus, shot put and thrower.

Kiefer’s already fourth in Eastwood history in the shot put with a throw of 37-2½ during her sophomore season in 2019. She finished second in the Northern Buckeye Conference meet in the event that season.

Kiefer also qualified for the state indoor championships in 2019 and 2020.

“I really missed the team aspect of it,” Kiefer said. “The team aspect helps everyone because we all push each other to get better, and I missed being around everyone and competing with everyone. Last year was really disappointing.”

“It’s great to be back,” senior thrower Mason Steele said. “I really missed being around the team atmosphere and the guys. I love the throwing, but there’s something about the atmosphere that gets you going, and that’s what I missed the most.”

Steele qualified for the state indoor meet in the weight throw in 2020.

Sharpening their skills

Once the Eagles had their 2020 season ended March 13, they worked out on their own in hopes they might have their season saved.

Ava’s dad, Jeff, painted throwing rings in the yard of their home in Luckey and added a wooden toeboard.

“That was nice to be able to still throw,” Kiefer said. “I tried to work on my technique, and keep that going.”

Steele created a throwing area at his three-acre home on the outskirts of Luckey. The home, once a farm, saw Steele turn the concrete base of what was once a chicken coop into a throwing ring.

“It was great being able to throw at home,” Steele said.

Eastwood had its normal winter indoor season in 2020, meeting once a week for practice or a meet followed by the state meet March 7. In between, the Ohio High School Association moved up the start of outdoor practice on Feb. 24.

The Eagles held their final practice March 13, and the season never restarted.

Eastwood began preparing for this year’s outdoor season during indoor practice in January. The Eagles only had practices indoor since the only meets were too far away, and their first outdoor practice was held February 24.

“Everything’s been good overall, but the throws are technical events,” Steele said. “There are still some things we need to learn and re-learn, and we were only freshmen and sophomores the last time we had a meet.”

“Being a technique event makes it a little trickier to get back where we were,” Steele added. “It only took a couple of days for us to get back to normal, and it feels great.”



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The coaches

Like the athletes, head coaches Brian Sabo and Nikki Sabo and their assistant coaches are thrilled to be with their teams again. Although the Eagles competed during the 2020 indoor season, they haven’t had an outdoor meet since 2019.

“You’re excited to be able to coach the kids again,” said Nikki Sabo, the girls head coach. “Even without having a season, the progression they’ve had, compared to two years ago, gets you excited. They’re young. They’re absorbing information. They’re very coachable. That’s exciting. It takes away from the extra stuff a coach has to do because of COVID protocols. It makes it worth it. It’s great just to have a team to coach.”

Eastwood opens the regular season March 30 when it hosts Oak Harbor and then competes in the Liberty-Benton Invitational two days later. The Eagles will host the Eastwood Relays April 23 and the NBC meet May 15 before starting the Division II district meet May 20 at Oak Harbor.

“Getting back to coaching track and field and being around the kids felt so right and so invigorating,” said Brian Sabo, the boys head coach. “I had so much more energy.”

“We’re so young, and there’s so much teaching and youthful exuberance, that’s making it challenging, but fun as well,” Brian Sabo added. “There are so many more things we want to tackle and so many more things we want to do.”

The protocols

The Eagles maintain social distancing and wear masks when they're not competing. Pre-practice meetings are held with social distancing guidelines, the girls in the Eagles Nest and the boys in the auditorium. Practice starts with a health screening, including a temperature check.

"As long as we still have a season, I don't mind doing those things because it allows us to have a season," Kiefer said. "Sometimes it's annoying, but you learn to deal with it, and it's better than not having a season. We're used to them now."

"We're used to the protocols now, but every once in a while, I find myself slipping a bit with them, pulling my mask down," Steele said. "You just have to remember they're for everyone's health and safety. We'd rather do the protocols than not have a season. I'll tie one arm behind my back if it means having a track season."

Nikki Sabo and Brian Sabo said the athletes haven't had an issue adjusting to the protocols, since most are in their second or third sport this year, and in-person learning has resumed. "There's only a few that track is the first time they've had to wear a mask at practice or have a health check after school," Nikki Sabo said. "The thing that makes it a little bit different for us is because there are 58 of them which is two times the size of most teams. They've handled it very well. They've adjusted. We've made some adjustments on the fly, and they go with it. So far, so good. You have to give them a general reminder once in a while, get your mask up or you need a little more distance between you, and they do it."



Photo: Danielle DeFalco

Big picture

The Eagles are looking forward to their first meet on March 30. The team will hold a mini intrasquad meet a week before facing Oak Harbor to help their athletes get used to competing in a meet again.

"They're excited about the season," Nikki Sabo said. "They want to see where they're at with their times and distances. The one part they're a little apprehensive about is getting quarantined and having some of their time taken away, especially after last season was taken away. The excitement of the season and the fact meets are coming up definitely outweigh that anxiety or concern.

"Once you get out to practice, it's normal," Nikki Sabo added. "It's just the stuff beforehand that's different. Once you start coaching, it's still coaching. They're athletes. We're coaches. Your goal is to create a fun, positive environment to help the kids improve."

The athletes are excited, too.

“It’s been nice to get back to school and track, and being able to see your friends, instead of having to do it on the phone,” Kiefer said. “We’re excited about the season. All of us want to have PRs (personal records) and improve, and do well as team.”

“I’m really excited about the season about not having a season last year and being in the house for so long,” Kiefer said. “It’s really nice to get out of house and interact with people, and be able to throw at the same time. We have a lot of good athletes with a lot of potential. If we keep improving, we can have a really good season.”