

## DeFalco, Hesselbart qualify for state

### By Kevin Gordon

LEXINGTON — Bryce DeFalco's junior season was difficult and challenging, at best. Twelve months later, the Eastwood High School senior is headed to the state track and field championships.

DeFalco qualified for his sport's showcase event in the long jump with a fourth-place finish during Thursday's Division II regional at Lexington High School. He jumped 20-2¼.

The top four finishers in each event at the regional qualify for state, along with two at-large berths. The at-large berths go to the next two finishers with the best time/height/distance, regardless of regional.

DeFalco was one of two state qualifiers for the Eagles, joining classmate Dalton Hesselbart, who earned an at-large berth in the pole vault after finishing fifth. Hesselbart advanced to state for the third straight season after his freshman season was canceled because of COVID. The state meet is June 2-3 at Ohio State University's Owens Stadium.

Also for Eastwood Thursday, sophomore Jesse Poiry qualified for Saturday's finals of the 300 hurdles.

### DeFalco advances to state

DeFalco is headed for state after his junior season was slowed because of a broken fibula in his leg during Eastwood's Week 7 football game on Oct. 1 in the fall of 2021. He was never healthy last season before returning to full strength this season.

DeFalco finished first in his flight with the 20-2¼ mark and was fourth going into the finals.

The 16 jumpers each received three jumps during the preliminaries, with the nine best distances advancing to the finals. Each athlete received three more jumps in the finals to try to improve their mark. DeFalco competed in the first flight.

"After watching Dalton (Hesselbart) and Julia (Sabo) at state the last two years, and my 4x100 relay not making it to state last year, I envisioned myself competing at state this year," DeFalco said.

Julia Sabo, an Eastwood senior, also is a two-time state qualifier in the pole vault and will try for another trip to state in her specialty on Saturday.

"Once football was over last fall, it was time to lock in on track, and I knew in the back of my mind getting to state was my end goal," DeFalco said. "I still can't believe I made it to state. Watching it come together is truly satisfying."

When DeFalco finished first in the opening flight, it guaranteed him a spot in the finals. He then had to wait approximately 45 minutes for the second flight to finish and the finals to begin.

"I was a little out of it during the prelims, so that was a nice time to reset for the finals," DeFalco said. "I knew I had to refocus and get right back at it."

DeFalco's best jump in the finals was 19-11¼, and no other jumpers could bump him from the final automatic state berth. Milan Edison junior Trayvon Williams won with a distance of 21-1.

Eastwood sophomore Kevin Lewis finished 14<sup>th</sup> at 18-5.

“It was exhilarating to be in fourth place, but you can’t worry about that,” DeFalco said. “You have to worry about you and what you can control. I was able to hang on. The will to fight is how I moved on. It wasn’t about my place. I was only focused on what I had to do.”

The athletes jumped into a brutally strong headwind which reduced the distances they were going.

“The conditions were not great,” DeFalco said. “It’s rare in our region 21-1 wins and 20-2 is fourth. The distances were very skewed with the wind. You have to have the willpower to fight through it. You have to worry about your place and not your distance.” DeFalco entered the regional tied for the 15<sup>th</sup>-best jump, based on distances from last week’s district meets. His jumped 20-1½ at the district meet. His PR of 21-3 came earlier this season.

“Coming in, I wasn’t seeded very high,” DeFalco said. “I had to take that with a grain salt. You never know what can happen, especially with field events. What happens at the meet, not what’s written on paper, is what counts. You have to show up and do it.” DeFalco had a solid sophomore season, winning the Northern Buckeye Conference title with a jump of 21-0½ and finishing third in the district with a jump of 19-9 ½ to advance to the regional. He jumped 19-5 at the regional for 10<sup>th</sup> place. His best jump as a sophomore was 21-2.

Last season, his best jump was only 18-8½ because he was still recovering from the broken fibula.

This season, DeFalco jumped 20-9¼ in the team’s first meet against Oak Harbor March 28. He suffered a pulled hamstring during a running event later in that meet, and wasn’t back to full strength until April 15 at the Napoleon Invitational where he jumped 20-10½.

“That’s when I knew was rolling and back to my old self,” DeFalco said. “After the Oak Harbor meet, I wasn’t going to let the hamstring injury determine the rest of my season. I was going to do everything I needed to get back to where I needed to be.

“I wanted to get back to this point,” DeFalco added. “I knew I had it in me. I needed the right mindset and the right drive. One thing I won’t be lacking is motivation. I know what it takes to keep pushing through when you don’t feel like it.”

DeFalco also regained his NBC championship this season, jumping a PR of 21-3 to finish first.

“What a great story,” said Eagle coach Nikki Sabo, who works with the long jumpers.

“He was pretty frustrated last year. This year, he was back to his old self physically, but also mentally and confidently. That showed throughout the entire season. For him to qualify for state is icing on the cake.”

### **Hesselbart earns return to state**

Hesselbart survived a rare off night to qualify for state. He jumped 13-4 to finish fifth — one spot shy of an automatic berth to state, but he still earned one of the two at-large berths, the other at-large height was 13-6.

Caledonia River Valley junior Cooper Miller won with a height of 14-0. The second-place finisher also cleared 14-0, while the third- and fourth-placers both jumped 13-8.

Eastwood freshman Cullen Shank cleared 11-6 to tie for 13<sup>th</sup>.

"It definitely wasn't the prettiest, but I'll be competing next week, and I'm happy about that," Hesselbart said. "I was pleased with my height, but I kept coming down on the bar, and a miss is a miss. At least, I've got another week to fix everything."

Hesselbart had approximately an hour between his last vault and when he found out from his coaches he qualified for state.

"That wasn't the most fun time, having to wait," Hesselbart said. "I figured when I went out of the vault, it was the last time I would ever pick up a pole. I hadn't been this upset in a long time, but it was a huge relief to make it. I'm very happy to be going to state." Hesselbart has jumped consistently well this season, including a PR of 14-6 that is tied for the fourth-best height in Eastwood history.

"I'm really happy he qualified for state again," said Eagle assistant coach Ethan Downey, who works with the team's vaulters. "He's deserving because he's worked so hard throughout his career. We're fortunate he gets to keep going.

"Sometimes you have bad days in the vault," Downey added. "We ran into one of those days. His run-thrus looked good, but things weren't moving like they usually do for us, and it happened on a regional day. But I'm excited to see him bounce back and show what he can do at state."

### **Poiry advances in 300 hurdles, Smith runs the 400**

Poiry qualified for the finals of the 300 hurdles with a time of 42.15 during the semifinals. The top two finishers in each semifinal and the next four fastest times, regardless of heat, advanced to the finals.

Poiry passed Liberty Union sophomore Caleb Hague during the final 200 meters to earn his spot in the finals. Poiry edged Hague by .28.

"My finish was one of the better parts of my race," Poiry said. "I thought I ran pretty well. I was in the fast heat. Most of these guys will be on the podium at state. It was great running against some really good competition."

Huron junior Beau Harkelroad had the fastest semifinal time of the eight finalists with a 39.75 clocking, followed by Liberty-Benton junior Owen Wilkins at 40.79 and Perkins sophomore Owen Stewart at 40.80.

By advancing to the finals, Poiry is guaranteed of being on the awards stand where the top eight finishers are recognized. His district time was the ninth-fastest of the regional qualifiers. His district time of 41.65 was a PR.

Saturday's running finals start at 12:30 p.m.

"Coming in, I was around 80-20 I wasn't going to make finals, but I still had a little bit of faith and it paid off," Poiry said. "I'll fight hard and give it everything I have in the finals."

Also, for the Eagles, sophomore Andre Lewis was 10<sup>th</sup> in the 300 hurdles in 42.61 and senior Noah Smith was 12<sup>th</sup> in the 400 in 42.58.

### **LEXINGTON REGIONAL INFORMATION/RESULTS**

<https://oh.milesplit.com/meets/550111-ohsaa-division-2-region-6-lexington-2023>

### **STATE MEET INFORMATION/RESULTS**

<https://www.ohsaa.org/Sports-Tournaments/Track-Field/2023-Track-and-Field/2023-State-Tournament-Coverage>