

Sponaugle brings more than fast times to Eagles



Photo Credit: Deb Streacker

By Kevin Gordon

Haley Sponaugle's times speak for themselves. The senior is one of Eastwood High School's all-time best distance runners, both in track and field, and cross country.

The timing systems and the stop watches, however, only measure a small part of her value to the team. Sponaugle is one of the Eagles' hardest workers on and off the track, leads the team with her actions and her words, serves as one of Eastwood's captains and excels academically.

She has a 4.2 grade-point average and has earned a full academic scholarship to Purdue University Fort Wayne where she will run track and field and cross country. She's planning on majority in biology.

"I'm definitely going to miss her," said T.J. Tuttamore, an assistant coach for both the track and field, and cross country teams. "She's brought so much to both teams in so many different ways."

Sponaugle enters the final six weeks of her outdoor high school track and field career on Eastwood's top 10 list in three different events. She's sixth in the 1,600 at 5:28.37, 10th in the 3,200 at 12:05.35 and seventh in the 4x800 relay at 9:57.32.

She's also a regular on the indoor lists. She helped set the school record earlier this year in the 4x800 relay with a 10:20.31. She also ranks second in the 3,200 (12:00.42), third in both the 800 (2:33.10) and the 1,600 (5:35.15), and seventh in the 4x800 (9:57.32). She also ran on the distance medley relay team which set a school record Friday night with a time of 13:01.83 when the Eagles won that race.

In cross country, Sponaugle is tied for fourth all-time at 19:08.

"She's always been really solid," said Eastwood girls track and field head coach Nathan Howard, who also is the head coach of the cross country team. "She brings leadership, but she's a steadying force for a lot of the girls. She's a leader, but she's also a good example.

"She's the standard we want to set and a lot of girls look up to her," Howard added. "Her work ethic and the way she goes about her business is the standard we want to set. She's a steadying force on the team."

Seeking even more success in the 4x800

Sponaugle's primary goal this season is to qualify for the Division II state meet in the 4x800 relay. The Eagles have been sixth in the event at the regional last two seasons, including a school top ten time of 9:57.32 which missed a trip to state by approximately 11 seconds.

The top four finishers in each event at the regional and the next two fastest times overall, regardless of region, qualify for state.

“We went into regionals last year with a goal of running as fast as we could,” Sponaugle said. “We ran a season-best time and we went below 10 (minutes). The year before, that would have made it to state with that time.”

Only Sponaugle and junior Leah Emch return from that team last season, but Eastwood has a deep and talented group of distance runners to make a legitimate run at state again this season.

“Our region is really tough,” Sponaugle said. “We have a lot of good teams. It was hard not to go to state last year, but we’re happy we ran well. We ran really fast, but it still wasn’t fast enough.

“You can run your best time, a PR (personal record) and you can still be last in the race,” Sponaugle added. “You can’t control what the other girls, the other teams are going to do. Someone can come out of nowhere and have a huge day and the spot you thought you had is gone. We talk a lot about race plans, controlling what we can control. Sometimes, it’s a lot more strategic, if we’re trying to get points or placings, rather than times. Once you get to districts and regionals, it’s all about placings and less about your time.”

Sponaugle enjoys the 4x800 and 4x400 relays, and finally earned her regular spot on the 4x800 team last season after two seasons of trying.

“Everyone wants to be on it because you’re one of the top girls,” Sponaugle said of the 4x800. “The relays feel bigger than the individual races. Our times were all so close last season. There were five of us running the same time and that was special. You’re running for each other and the team. We make it known track is a team sport and people are jumping for those opportunities, to run on the relays. You’re an individual, but you’re part of the relay and you’re trying to score points for the team.

“Especially with relays, you know the other three girls are going to give it their all, so I’m going to do the same because you’re counting on each other,” Sponaugle added.

“That’s the way it’s always been at Eastwood, at least during the four years I’ve been here. The relays aren’t something you have to beg people to run. People want to run relays at Eastwood.”

Individual goals

Sponaugle’s individual goals this season are to continue to lower her times in all of her events and win a Northern Buckeye Conference championship in at least one of her events. The conference meet is May 11 at Rossford’s Glenwood Athletic Complex. She was third in the 1,600 last season after finishing third in the 3,200 and fifth in the 1,600 as a sophomore. She’s also hoping to crack the NBC’s all-time top 10 in her events.

If Sponaugle was the team’s head coach, she’d like to try running the 4x800 relay, the 1,600 and the 3,200 at the conference meet this season — a total of 3½ miles.

“That’s really hard triple, once it gets hot out in May,” Sponaugle said. “But I wouldn’t be opposed to that, either. It would be fun, and why not try it?”

But in a more realistic world, Sponaugle said she’d probably expect to run the 4x800, and either the 1,600 or the 3,200 in the NBC meet.

“I’ve never won anything at the league,” Sponaugle said. “I’ve placed, but I’ve never won, so winning something would really be special. But if I’m second to an Eastwood girl, that’s fine, too. I just want to help the team win.”



Photo Credit: Danielle DeFalco

Sponaugle is happy with where she's at right now in terms of her times, considering she only ran three times in December because she was sick three separate times. She also missed the team's first indoor track and field meet because she didn't feel well. After the cross country season ended Nov. 2, Sponaugle and her teammates ran in the Churchill's half-marathon a week later and then took a week off to recharge mentally and physically before resuming their running in early December.

"I was worried I was going to be super far behind training-wise," Sponaugle said. "But from what I've run so far, I'm not too worried now because I'm back to where I was at the end of last season. I'm happy with where I'm at for this point in the season."

Hard work pays off

Although Sponaugle is a talented runner, she's worked hard for her success and to improve.

"Hard work is the biggest thing she brings. Even as a freshman, she led by her work," Tuttamore said. "She absolutely loves and enjoys running, and that's another thing that rubs off on the other kids."

Sponaugle also is a worker in cross country.

Sponaugle and the Eagles were three-time state qualifiers in cross country where she won the NBC individual title as a junior and was an all-conference honoree all four seasons. She finished second in the NBC as senior and as a sophomore, and was fifth as a freshman. The top seven runners in the conference meet receive first-team All-NBC recognition.

Her hard work has increased her speed. She's also running the 4x400 relay, and has run a 69-second split in that event.

"She's open to trying different things with her training," Howard said. "She's gotten faster and stronger. If you'd have told us in middle school, she would be running a 69-second 400, we'd have said no way. Ever. She's gotten faster.

"She's worked on those other things," Howard added. "It's not just putting in the extra miles all the time. She's always done that. She's embracing the weight room. She's embraced getting faster and all those other things that have made her a really strong runner."

"You're always going to get her best effort, no matter what the race is," Tuttamore said. "She'll always give whatever she has for that day. The effort level never be an issue with her."

Building relationships

Sponaugle enjoys the relationships and friendships she's built with her teammates on the track and field, and cross country teams. Many of Eastwood's distance runners are members of both teams.

“We’re a big group, and we feed off of each other a lot because there are a limited number of spots and everyone wants to get one of those spots,” Sponaugle said. “Even the girls who know they’re never going to run in the invitationals they still come out and watch the meets and support us because they care about the team and all of the girls on the team. There’s not a lot of tension among the runners to be the best. But we know if we can push each other to be faster, the team is going to be better.”

The distance runners also enjoy doing activities away from school and running.

“We like to go out to eat and talk about things that aren’t running related. That’s what helps us build relationships with each other,” Sponaugle said. “We all recognize there’s a lot more to life than running. We talk about other things. We talk about things we enjoy. We bond over that. It’s easy to run together and work hard together because it’s not all about the running. We’re all good friends away from the running.”

And Sponaugle enjoys running both sports.

“I like both now,” she said. “My freshmen and sophomore years, I would have said I like track over cross country. Now, cross country is my favorite because I like the longer distances and I’m better at the longer distances. That’s how I run, and it’s more fun to be in the woods during cross (country) meets.”

“Track has different things I like. (The sports) are more equal now. In track, you don’t run the same distance every week. Shorter is not my forte. I like running different distances and the different meets we go to. Some of the meets have a distance medley relay where you might be able to run a 1,200-meter distance.”



Photo credit: Danielle DeFalco

Captain and team leader

Sponaugle was a two-time captain of the cross country team and is in her second season as a track and field captain. She’s popular with her teammates and coaches because of her work ethic and because she’s a genuinely nice person when she’s not competing.

“The most important way to lead is with your actions,” Sponaugle said. “You can say things as much as you want, but they don’t mean anything if you’re not doing them. When you say or talk about things, you make sure you’re doing them.”

“It’s a great honor to be a captain, and it’s great people think that highly of you, but we have a lot of great leaders on our team who weren’t voted as captains. You don’t have to be a captain to be a leader on the team.”

Howard and Tuttamore both said Sponaugle is another coach on the team. Tuttamore said she’s part of his “workout committee” which he uses to see how the team’s athletes are feeling about an upcoming workout or how they might be feeling at different points of the season.

“She remembers everything,” Tuttamore said. “I know if I ask what we did two years ago, she’ll probably remember what the workout was. I’m always bouncing things off of her.

“She is another coach. I told her, what I am going to do next year when you’re gone, and she said you can call me. I can talk through things with her and she understands running at a high level. It’s a lot of fun talking to her.”

In addition to improving her times, Sponaugle has become more of a vocal leader on both of her teams.

“As she’s gotten into her later years, she’s become more of a vocal leader and a leader in other ways,” Tuttamore said. “I don’t have to explain as much. She helps explain things, and the whole group does that. They feed off of each other.”

“Just her leading by example is what helps the whole group,” Howard said. “They see what’s expected and follow her lead. She’s developed that over the years. She’s more comfortable as a leader now. She’s grown a lot since she was a freshman. She was really a soft-spoken kid as a freshman. She still worked hard, but I wouldn’t say she was a leader yet back then.”

“In cross, she’s a little more local because, maybe, it’s a little smaller group,” Howard added. “In track, the distance girls still look up to her in a lot of ways. Even among the captains, in track, she still takes charge. She sets things up. She takes initiative. She’s almost one of the captains of the captains because she’s experienced. She knows what she’s doing and she’s confident enough to do those things.”



Photo Credit: Danielle DeFalco

All in the family

Sponaugle is from a running family. Her sister, Hannah, was a standout track and field and cross country runner for the Eagles, and her parents, John and Valerie, ran track and cross country in high school, with John running both sports collegiately at Ohio University. Hannah, a 2017 graduate of Eastwood, remains fourth on Eastwood’s all-time list in the 1,600 (5:21.99) and seventh in the 3,200 (11:54.75). Her 4x800 relay team remains fifth on the Eagles’ all-time

list at 9:45.81. She’s second all-time in cross country with a time of 18:41.

“It’s never been a rivalry with (Hannah) because she’s been gone from high school for so long.” Haley Sponaugle said. “It’s not like we’ve been running together at the same time, but it’s still something fun to look at. We have a lot of fun with it.”

John Sponaugle ran in high school at Tuscarawas Valley, while Valerie Sponaugle ran at New Philadelphia. John Sponaugle qualified for the state track and field meet in the 1,600 and the 3,200 during his junior and senior years, finishing second in the 3,200 as a senior in 1985.

What's next

In addition to running both sports at PFW and majority in biology, Sponaugle's already been accepted into the school's academic honors program which earned her the scholarship. Her biology major will have an emphasis in ecology and evolutionary biology.

"That's crazy," Sponaugle said of being accepted into the honors program. "That's something you hear about, but you will never think it will happen to you. I thought it was a stretch, but I made it through the first round of applications and then I had to go through an interview process and I was selected for the program. I'll have to do some research and have it published, but I'm not sure I'm qualified for that."

Once she's graduated from PFW, Sponaugle will pursue a career in the environment, perhaps in a state or national park or with the EPA, or something focused on conservation or historical things. She also would consider being a park ranger.

At Eastwood, she plays in the marching band, the concert band and the pep band, and played in the pit orchestra during the musical. Her instruments are the clarinet and the alto sax. She's a member of Tri-M (a music honorary), Key Club and the Future Farmers of America.

Outside of Eastwood, she's a member of 4-H and has been her club's president the last three years.