

Sanchez embracing bigger role for Eagles



By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — Kaiden Sanchez's story is typical of many athletes on Eastwood High School's boys track and field team.

The 5-foot-11, 190-pounder has worked hard and steadily improved during his first two seasons, competing in the team's Tuesday dual meets and earning a chance to perform in the Eagles' big weekend invitationals.

Now, a junior, Sanchez is ready for a leading role on the team. Sanchez is one of the team's best sprinters and figures prominently in the 100 and the 200, and on the team's sprint relays. He's also emerging as a team leader.

"I still approach everything the same," said Sanchez, who ran personal-record times in the 60- and 200-meter dashes during the winter indoor season. He also ran on Eastwood's 4x200 relay team which just missed qualifying for the Division II-III state indoor championships.

His indoor PRs were 7.54 in the 600 and 24.57 in the 200.

"I've worked just as hard as I did the last two seasons," Sanchez said. "Now, I have to be a leader for the younger guys because, when I was a freshman, some of the older guys took me under their wing and made me feel welcome, and helped me out. I want to be that way for the younger guys on this team. I try to lead by being their friend and showing them what to do."

Sanchez, like many of his teammates, is a regular in the weight room after practice during the week and throughout the year.

"I try to block out all of the outside noise and put my head down

go to work," Sanchez said. "That's what the weight room is to me, come in and get better, and it's the same on the track. When your time comes, you try to seize the opportunity."

What's next

Sanchez's individual goals this season are to lower his PRs of 11.81 in the 100 and 24.35 in the 200. His early-season goals are to be under 11.5 in the 100 and 24.2 in the 200.

"My indoor season was pretty solid, and my starts have gotten better," Sanchez said. "That's helped my confidence going into the outdoor season.

"I've really been working on my starts, to get better at them because my starts have been mediocre," Sanchez added. "I need to build up speed quicker. My starts have gotten better, but they can still definitely get better."

Sanchez also is looking forward to running on Eastwood's sprint relays, although the lineups for the 4x100, 4x200 and 4x400 teams are still being evaluated since it's still early in the season. The Eagles' first meet is March 28 when they host Oak Harbor.

Athletes are limited to four events per meet. Sanchez is aiming to being a member of the 4x100 and 4x200 teams, but those relays are separated only by the girls and boys 1,600 runs. And the 100 and the 4x200 are back.

"We can do really well in the relays, and I'm really excited about them," Sanchez said. "The relays are a lot of fun because of the team aspect of it. You enjoy running for each other, and celebrating your successes. You're running for each other."

Sanchez is no stranger to success. He finished fifth in the 100 in the Northern Buckeye Conference Championships last season in 11.84, just .03 off his PR. He also helped the Eagles win the 4x100. As a freshman, he ran on Eastwood's 4x200 team which finished fourth.

Last season, Sanchez helped the Eagles qualify for the Division II regional in both the 4x100 and 4x200 relays. He ran on the Eagles' 4x200 in the district meet as a freshman.

"He works," Eastwood head coach Brian Sabo said. "When you watch him run, you feel the ground move because he's so powerful. He works and will try anything you ask of him. He shows up to the weight room, to practice. He wants to get better. He asks questions.

"I love seeing his personality come out," Sabo added. "He's a fairly quiet kid, but he's starting to show some emotion, and I'm hoping to see a whole lot more of that emotion. I love watching him succeed because he's not the same kid I remember in seventh-grade football."



Fighting for a spot

Entering last season's district meet, Sabo didn't have Sanchez on the team's 4x200 relay. Sanchez was on the 4x100 team, but Sabo wasn't sure his then sophomore could handle the quick turnaround from the 4x200 to the 4x100.

But Sanchez asked for a meeting with Sabo to ask for a spot on the 4x200 team. Sabo eventually added him to the team, and the Eagles finished fourth to advance to the regional.

"I felt I should have been on that team, that I was one of the four fastest guys. I felt like I deserved to be on

it," Sabo said. "It was a little nerve wracking at first talking to (Sabo) about it, but after I started to talking to him, it was easy.

"That was a great feeling, knowing he had the trust in me to run it," Sanchez said. "I didn't really feel any extra pressure to run well, maybe a little extra pressure. When I'm feeling pressure to do well, I try to block it out and not think about it, just concentrating on what I have to do to perform well."

Sabo appreciated Sanchez believing in himself and being confident to discuss his spot on that team.

"He had times that were good enough," Sabo said. "What I really respected and appreciated is he fought for that spot, and felt he deserved that spot.

"I gave him my concerns, as long as he can feel fresh and good enough, and he proved he could," Sabo added. "I want guys like that. He knew I had the final call, and I wanted to get other guys involved. I'm all right with guys who want to be in certain spots, and I don't have a problem discussing it. Sometimes I'm wrong."

Physical maturity

Even though Sanchez is powerfully built as a junior, that wasn't the case when he was a seventh- and eighth-grader and stood 5-8, 200.

"I was a chubby, bigger kid who was lazy," Sanchez recalled. "I didn't want to lift weights or do anything."

He threw the discus and the shot put as a seventh-grader, but his eighth-grade season was canceled because of COVID. His transformation started when he was quarantined at home during the pandemic. When practice started for freshmen football, he became a regular in the weight room.

Sanchez was down to 180 pounds for the football season.

"When I was in my house, I wouldn't starve myself, but I wouldn't overeat and gain weight," Sanchez said. "I wanted to change because I didn't feel good about myself. I didn't want to look in the mirror. The results felt good. It felt really good to see what you were working so hard to get."

Sanchez is a tight end and defensive end on the football team.

"The weight lifting has been paying off since I freshman year," Sanchez said. "It's really helped me in both sports. I'm a lot stronger and faster. I really enjoy it. The weight room has a great atmosphere. It's a fun. The weight room coaches (Sabo and Andy Friess) are great. They're positive. They're willing to help you. It's a great place to be."



Seeking another conference championship

Sanchez also is striving to help the Eagles win another conference championship.

Eastwood is the defending NBC champion after having its string of 19 straight championships ended by Genoa in 2021. The 2020 NBC meet was canceled because of COVID. The NBC Championships are May 14 at Otsego High School. Eastwood has 56 athletes on its roster, consisting of six seniors, 13 juniors, 17 sophomores and 20 freshmen. The Eagles return 24 letter winners.

"We have a good mix of guys on the team," Sanchez said. "We're set up to have a lot of success, but we still have to go out and do the work and improve. Nothing is ever given to you, and you still have to perform in the moment. We have a lot of good competition on the team, and that pushes us to get better every day in practice.

"Everyone is working towards one goal," Sanchez added. "Nobody views each other as competition. We all want to see each other succeed. I love our team atmosphere."

The team's captains are: seniors Bryce DeFalco, Keagan Herr, Dalton Hesselbart, Wes Johnson, Anthony Molina and Noah Smith; and junior Ian Sibberson.

"It's exciting because he's improved, and the group around him has improved. It's a fun group," Sabo said. "He knows I'm one of *the* guys this year. I'm an upperclassmen, I've been to some big meets. He's been on relays, open events. He's been to regionals. It's fun to watch that maturity."

"He'll be a leader because he knows what's he's doing, and he's still looking to improve," Sabo added. "He's very humble."



Future plans

Sanchez, who has a 3.3 grade-point average, is undecided on his future plans.

He originally was planning on going straight to work as a welder after high school. He attends Penta Vocational School where he's in its welding program. Now, he's considering going to college and perhaps playing football and running track at the next level.

"If that opportunity comes, I'll definitely take advantage of it," Sanchez said.

He's the son of two former Eastwood athletes. His dad, Kyle, played golf and ran track. His mom, the former Carissa Rutter, played

volleyball and basketball, and ran track. His mom also attended Elmwood High School until her junior year.

