

Six-inch PR leads Sabo to fourth-place tie at State Meet



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By Kevin Gordon

PICKERINGTON — Julia Sabo fashioned the perfect ending to an already-terrific season Saturday morning.

The Eastwood High School pole vaulter tied for fourth place in her specialty with a six-inch personal record that increased her school record during the Division II state track and field championships.

The sophomore cleared 11-6 to extend her school record of 11-0 set May 15 during the Northern Buckeye Conference Championships at Eastwood.

The bar then was raised to 11-10, but Sabo missed all three of her attempts to end her day. Five of the 18 vaulters, including Sabo, cleared 11-6 or better at Pickerington North High School. She tied St. Clairsville junior Emily Thompson for fourth to earn All-Ohio recognition and a spot on the awards podium. The top eight finishers in each event at state received All-Ohio honors and were recognized on the podium after the event.

The tie between Sabo and Thompson couldn't be broken because both cleared 11-6 on their first attempt and both had four total misses during the competition. They both missed their first attempt at 11-0. Thompson also missed all three tries at 11-10.

"It's an amazing day, just awesome," Sabo said. "My goal coming in was to place and be on the podium, and get a PR."

Sabo was one of two Eagles who vaulted at state. Sophomore Dalton Hesselbart cleared 13-0 to finish in a tie for 14th in the boys meet.



Clearing 11' 6" on her first attempt.





Soaring to new heights

Cheered on by a large and enthusiastic group of teammates, friends, family and coaches, Sabo jumped consistently well as she cleared each of the first three bars with plenty of room to spare.

Her only miss before the three at 11-10 came on her first attempt at 11-0. She cleared 11-0 or better for just the second time this season, although she made one attempt at 11-4 at the NBC after making 11-0. Sabo then passed on her final two attempts at 11-4 during the NBC meet to concentrate on her running events later in the day. She

cleared 10-9 April 17 at the Napoleon Invitational, and had made 10-7 or 10-8 a combined total of three times.

“I’m super proud of her, not only clearing a PR, but how she prepared. Today, she was focused and any adjustments he made, she was dialed in,” Eagle boys head coach Brian Sabo, referring to assistant coach Ethan Downey.

Brian Sabo, who is Julia’s dad, and Downey coach the vaulters in Eastwood’s boys and girls programs.

“This was the best week of jumping we’ve had,” Brian Sabo added. “She was really prepared and focused. I thought 11-0 with no misses or you come down here and PR, that’s how kids win here or they move up the awards stand. She was really good today. When you’re clean, you have a chance to do well.”

The competition opened at 9-0. Sabo cleared 9-0, 10-0, 10-6 and 11-6 on her first attempt, and 11-0 on her second attempt. Even on her miss on her initial try at 11-0, she had the bar cleared before knocking it down with her upper body.

Sabo easily cleared 11-6 on a pole she never used before — with ample room to spare. As soon as Sabo realized she had cleared the bar, she broke into a huge smile even before she landed on the pit.

“I knew I had it going over, Julia Sabo said. “I thought 11-4, 11-6 was possible today, so I was confident at those heights. To get 11-6 on my first attempt was an amazing feeling.”

“11-6 was a bomb,” Brian Sabo said. “It was a really good jump on a pole we never used before. She didn’t hesitate. That’s what you hope for. She was pretty dialed in with her run throughs and attempts at every height. We were clean the whole day. I’m really happy because she’s really, really owned the event and put a lot of work into it. She realizes she still has a lot left.”

Intense competition

Liberty-Benton senior Alexis Rickenbacker won the state championship and Warsaw River View senior Kelsey Hartsock was second. Both cleared 12-6, but Rickenbacker won because she made

the height on her first attempt and Hartsock made it on her second. Both missed all three attempts at 12-10.

Third place went to Springfield Greenfield sophomore Tru Buddenberg, who cleared 11-10. "I was seeded eighth coming in, so I was thinking at least top eight and getting on the podium," Julia Sabo said. "As I was vaulting, I started thinking fourth or fifth place might be possible. I felt really good at the start. I felt really prepared and wanted to get a PR. I felt like I was going to have a really good day."

"A fantastic day," Downey said. "Any time you can come in here and stand on the podium and get a PR, you can't ask for anything more than that."

Julia Sabo entered the state meet tied for the eighth-best vault, based on heights from last week's regional meets. She finished third in the Lexington regional with a vault of 10-8 and won the Oak Harbor district with a jump of 10-7.

The University of Alabama bound Rickenbacker had a PR of 12-5, the best vault in Division II this season.

"To have a six-inch PR at the state meet and stand on the podium, you can't ask for anything better than that," said Eagle girls head coach Nikki Sabo, who is Julia's mom. "She was crushing bars. She took advantage of her opportunity and I am so proud of her efforts today.

"Coming in here and watching Dalton compete yesterday, and seeing how it's run and what to expect, that helped her," Nikki Sabo added. "She competed really well."



An early beginning

Brian Sabo said his daughter didn't have any interest in vaulting until she was in the sixth grade when Coach Downey asked her to try the event during one of Eastwood's winter indoor practices.

"I really enjoyed it at the beginning," Julia Sabo said. "It was fun, and then I realized I had the techniques down, and it felt like something I could be good at and do well with."

Her career started to take off in middle school. She set the middle school record as an eighth grader with a height of 9-1. Her freshmen season was wiped out because of the COVID-19 pandemic barely three weeks into practice.

Before the outdoor season was canceled, Sabo qualified for the state indoor meet and set the school indoor record of 9-8.

Sabo opened this season with a PR vault of 10-0 against Oak Harbor March 30, the third-best height in school history. She PR'd five more times during the season, and first broke the school record with a vault of 10-7 April 9 at the Whitmer Invitational.

The pole vault record before this season was 10-6, set by Elise Wolff in 2014 and matched by Allison Abke in 2017.

“I really got serious about it when I broke the middle school record,” Julia Sabo said. “I started realizing I could get somewhere and do well with it. I realized I was around some good people and could be pretty good at, and I wanted to break the high school record.”

“She really wanted nothing to do with it until sixth grade,” Brian Sabo said. “Coach Downey asked her to pick up a pole, and the rest is history. She realized it was OK, and she was kind of good at it, and it was kind of fun. I didn’t say a whole lot. Then, she did it again, and it was fun. In middle school is when she was doing well, and she realized this is something I’m really good at.”

Julia Sabo’s vaulting has been helped by her long-time involvement in gymnastics, and she’s a member of Eastwood’s gymnastics team. She also runs the sprints and the sprint relays.

“The gymnastics background helps a ton,” Brian Sabo said. “She’s gotten significantly stronger. She lifts. That has helped. She’s really tried to own the technical side of it. When you own your event or the sport you’re doing, you’re going to see some results. The thing I respect the most about her is not the talent or the jumps, but her taking ownership of her event, and being dialed in.”

Julia Sabo joins her parents as All-Ohio honorees.

Nikki Sabo, the former Nikki Litz, was a two-time Division II All-Ohio long jumper at Perkins. She finished fourth in the state in 1992 and fifth in 1993. Brian Sabo pole vaulted at Canton GlenOak, finishing fifth in the Division I state meet in 1992.

What’s next

Since Julia Sabo is only a sophomore, she’s eligible to return to state the next two seasons.

“I want to keep practicing, and keep working on my technique and get back here next year and my senior year,” Julia Sabo said. “This motivates me even more. To be in top four as a sophomore makes me want to work even harder and make sure I get to keep coming back.”

“Confidence and experience are the big things for her today in terms of next season,” Downey said. “Hopefully, she enjoyed the experience because we did. She had a great day.”



BOYS RECAP

Hesselbart enjoys state experience

Hesselbart cleared the opening height of 13-0 on his second attempt and then missed all three of his attempts at 13-6.

“This was a good experience,” said Hesselbart, whose PR of 13-6 came May 4 during a dual meet at Elmwood. “I did all right,” Hesselbart said. “I enjoyed the great environment and the experience. This is definitely a motivator for next year. I definitely

want to get back here. I got to dip my toes in the water. It was nice to have this experience.”



Perry junior Javin Richards won the state championship with a vault of 15-6, while Baltimore Liberty-Union senior Jimmy Rhoads was second, and Navarre Fairless junior Brant Marchand was third. Both cleared 14-10.

A jump of 14-0 was needed to place and make the podium. Three vaulters tied for eighth.

"He prepared really well," Brian Sabo said. "This week, we had two really good practices. When we came in today, he was ready. When he was doing run throughs, he was better than some of the other guys, considering this was his first time here as a sophomore.

"We opened at a height he only cleared a couple of times," Sabo added. "We used two poles we had never used before. That tells me he came in ready. We might not have vaulted technically as well as we needed to, to clear 13-6 and 14-0. I thought it would take 13-6 no misses or 14-0 for sure to place. We would have had to PR to make the awards stand."

Hesselbart advanced to state as an at-large qualifier after clearing 13-0 for fifth place in the regional at Lexington. The top four finishers in each of the four regionals, and the next two best heights, regardless of region, qualified for state.

"The experience and the realization that I belong here with the top 19 jumpers in the state as a sophomore is really important," Brian Sabo said. "I hope he takes all of this and realizes there's a lot left for us to accomplish the next two years."

Complete results of the meet are available at:

<https://www.baumspage.com/track/ohsaahs/2/2021/Complete%20Results.htm>