

Cover Story | Lauren Sokolowski

I-W Senior Focused On Fourth Title

BY JEREMY HOECK
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IRENE — Lauren Sokolowski has always been active. Hauling hay on the family farm. Riding horses. Running cross country. Playing basketball. Jumping over hurdles.

The senior at Irene-Wakonda High School has never slowed down.

And when it comes to her exploits on the track, Sokolowski has never been caught. Three state titles in the 100-meter hurdles have followed, and a fourth could be on the way.

Five years after not being sure what track event she wanted to pursue, Sokolowski has not only become accustomed to having the target on her back, she has embraced it.

"It's nice, yes," she said with a smile.

By the time Sokolowski reached high school in 2011, she had already captured a pair of fourth-place finishes in the 100 hurdles at the state meet. What followed were three consecutive Class B titles (from 2012 to 2014) each year cutting down her time in the event and each year further distancing herself from those middle school days when potential hadn't yet crossed paths with production.

"It just came natural to me," she said. "I've liked it ever since I started."

The Early Days

Sokolowski's mother Deb, herself a former hurdles standout, vividly remembers the sight of her daughter criss-crossing the basketball court in middle school.

"We thought she might have some potential because she was so quick in basketball," said Deb, who was a hurdler for Tyndall-Tabor back in the late 1970s.

And then there was cross country.

A member of Irene-Wakonda's junior varsity team in sixth grade, Lauren's first competitive race was in Free-



Irene-Wakonda's Lauren Sokolowski, center, looks up to the scoreboard as she leads the girls' 60-meter hurdles finals at the Dan Lennon Class B Invitational on March 24 at the DakotaDome in Vermillion. Sokolowski won the event in a near-record time of 9.27.

man. How did she do? Second place.

"She was this little pip squeak out there," her mom recalls. "We were pretty shocked."

As Lauren's seventh grade year came around, her mother emailed Irene-Wakonda track coach Brent Mutchelknaus with what was basically a plea to let Lauren explore the different events — to not automatically put her in distance races, Deb said.

"I was afraid she'd be put in the mile or two mile," Deb said. "That's why I emailed him. Thankfully he was really good about it; he said, 'Absolutely.'"

Lauren went to a few practices, tried the pole vault and long jump; anything possible.

She came home one day and said to her mother, "I kind of like those hurdles," Deb recalls.

"I thought, 'Oh gosh,'" Deb said. "They're hard to do, you have to master your steps, learn the blocks. I wasn't too crazy about it."

"I know what it's like. They're not the easiest thing to do."

In time, though, Lauren progressed in the hurdles. The technique — stay low, attack the hurdle, snap your leg down — was never really an issue from the start.

"She started three-stepping the first time she stepped on a track," Mutchelknaus said. "That's not normal for someone new."

Even for the daughter of a former hurdler, who could have just as easily pushed her daughter into the event.

"I didn't find out until my eighth grade year that she ran," Lauren said. "She let me decide."

"I just wanted to try something different, but hurdles just stuck."

State Champion

Sokolowski had already finished fourth in the 100 hurdles as a seventh-grader and then again as an eighth-grader.

Then came May 26, 2012.

She officially took over the reins of the event in Class B, by winning a state title on a rainy day in Rapid City. Sokolowski wasn't done, though. Far from it.

She repeated as a state champion in 2013 as a sophomore, and last year as a junior won for a third time — further distancing herself from the rest of the field. Her first-place time of 14.98 was well in front of second place (15.57).

"It's a lot of dedication," Mutchelknaus said. "She's certainly got some great athletic ability, though."

Not to mention a laser-like intensity.

Whether it was something with her beloved horse, Belle, or something school-related, or her work on the track, Sokolowski has always been hard to pry away from the task at hand.

"She has a sense of focus," Deb said. "When she gets focused on something, you can't get her mind off of it."

"That helps her with the hurdles."

As has — surprisingly — an increased focus in the weight room. Over the off-season, Sokolowski spent more time lifting weights, according to her mother.

"I was a little worried," Deb said. "I was thinking, 'Are you sure?' She bulked up quite a bit. There were muscles all over the place."

What didn't change, though, was Sokolowski's technique.

"My arm work has gotten better, and the steps have gotten better," Lauren said. "Obviously you can see it in the times, but I'm just really happy about that."

Like what she was doing in the weight room, most of Sokolowski's work has come off the track.

As an example, she came in the morning of the Dan Lennon Invitational on March 24 for some extra work — at 6:45 a.m., in fact.

"She enjoys it, and she knows she has to work at it," Mutchelknaus said.

What's Next?

Though she competes against Class B athletes at the state meet, Sokolowski has always had plenty of opportunities to test herself against the state's higher two classes.

Irene-Wakonda will again compete at the Howard Wood Dakota Relays in Sioux Falls, the First Dakota Relays in Yankton — the two most prestigious meets on the schedule before state.

Still, as successful as she's been, Sokolowski still battles jitters, her coach said.

"She's like everybody, she gets nerves," Mutchelknaus said.

Sokolowski, though, has always enjoyed the bigger meets, the ones where she gets to compete against Class AA and A opponents.

"That brings out the best in here," Mutchelknaus said.

While the state meet is the biggest stage in South Dakota, Sokolowski only gets to run against Class B athletes. The Howard Wood Dakota Relays, on the other, provide her a perfect opportunity to run with and against every class — and other states.

In last year's Relays in Sioux Falls, Sokolowski clocked a 14.78 to win the 100 hurdles, beating out (in order) Harrisburg, Mitchell, Sioux Falls Roosevelt, Jamestown (N.D.), Rapid City Central and two runners from Sioux Falls Christian.

As she gets into the routine of her senior season, Sokolowski has zeroed in one particular goal: one before she starts thinking about a possible fourth straight hurdles title.

A state record.

The South Dakota record in the 100 hurdles is 13.89 (set in 2009), while the state meet record is 14.12, also set in 2009.

"That's what I'm going for. That's my biggest goal," she said.

You can follow Jeremy Hoeck on Twitter at twitter.com/jhoeck. Discuss this story at www.yankton.net.

Track & Field: Yankton Reloads For 2015

BY JAMES D. CIMBUREK
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Despite losing "significant points" on both the boys' and girls' side, fears about how the Yankton track and field team would get those points back were eased with strong performances in two pre-season meets.

"We were thinking, 'How do we get those points back?'" said Yankton head coach Luke Youmans. "But it's been a great surprise to see the younger kids and the returnees really step it up."

The boys graduated nine state qualifiers, including high jump state champion and four-event medalwinner J.J. Hejna, now competing for South Dakota State. Brice Cowman, now competing for the University of South Dakota, Ryan Olson (competing in basketball at Concordia-Seward) and Derek Brenner (competing in soccer at Benedictine) have also graduated, as have Justin Grode, James Hofer, Casey Skillingstad and Steven McKee. Two other state qualifiers also chose not to return.

The girls' side was also hit hard, with 1600-meter state champion Annie Kruse (competing at Augustana) and Whitlee Larson (competing at South Dakota State) gone, as are Hailey Luken, Brenna Fitzsimmons and Allie Murphy. Another member of three state-medalwinning relays chose not to return.

What Youmans and the rest of the Yankton coaching staff — Deb Lillie, Justin Olson, Cody Lukkes, Heidi Savey, Brooks Schild, Brady Muth and Chris Haynes — learned in Yankton's first two indoor meets was that while Yankton may not score the same points it did a year ago,



Yankton's Savannah Woods

it could still score as many or more points.

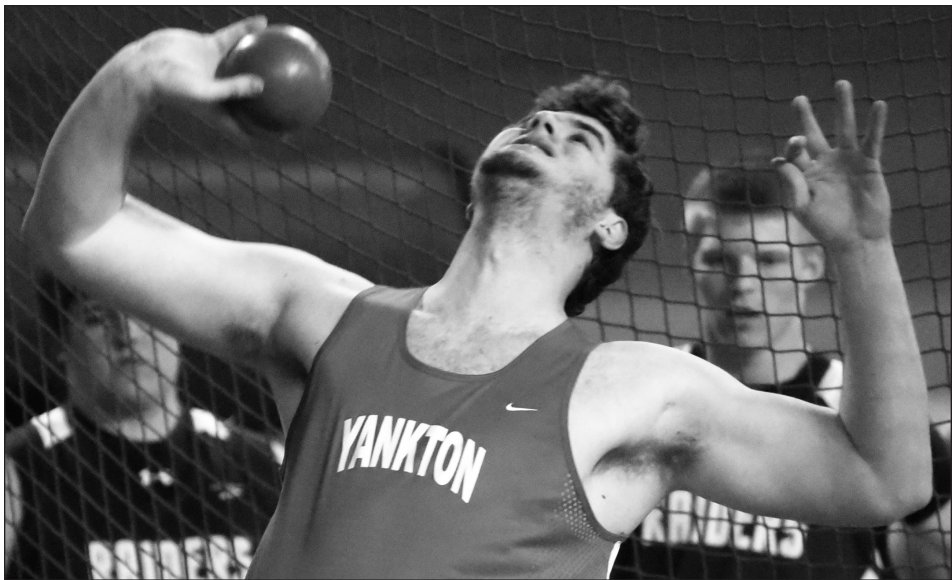
"We're not necessarily filling the exact same shoes. We have new shoes on," Youmans said. "We're not just seeing replacements, we're seeing boys being competitive in events that we haven't been competitive in in years."

"All of a sudden our boys' team is turning into a pretty competitive team at the state level."

The Bucks return eight

athletes who competed in the state meet a year ago, including two who took home hardware. Senior Lee Rose finished seventh in both the long jump and as part of the 1600 relay. Blake Savey, still recovering from a football injury, was also on that 1600 relay squad.

Also for the Bucks, seniors Ryan Sternhagen and Mason Strahl each competed in relays, with Strahl helping the 1600 relay get to finals before



Yankton's Nick Raab

giving way to another runner. Senior Charlie Stephenson qualified in both hurdle races and as a member of the 400 relay. Senior Nick Raab qualified in the discus. Juniors Gabe Dannenbring and Jared Rafferty were also a part of state meet relays a season ago.

Other seniors for the Bucks are Kyle Bergeson, Sean Chipman, Tim Cross, John Dannenbring, Evan Greenaway, Matt Fitzgerald and Osmar Pacheco.

That experience will be helpful for the Bucks this season, Stevenson said.

"We have a lot of seniors and other kids who stayed in

more sports," he said. "Our sprint relays were all in football, all active and all in track for four years."

With a number of talented

seniors — as well as several strong younger athletes — the Bucks are poised to improve

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Crofton Track & Field		
March 31.....	Hartington Invitational.....	1 p.m.
April 7.....	Knox County Invitational (Creighton).....	1:30 p.m.
April 14.....	Trojan Invitational (Hartington).....	1 p.m.
April 21.....	South Dakota-Nebraska Challenge (Tyndall).....	2 p.m.
April 23.....	Pierce Inv.....	3 p.m.
April 28.....	Creighton Inv.....	1:30 p.m.
April 30.....	Norfolk Classic.....	3 p.m.
May 2.....	Mid-State Conference (Albion).....	10 a.m.
May 7.....	Randolph Inv.....	2:30 p.m.
May 14.....	District C-3 (Hartington).....	TBD
May 22-23.....	State Meet (Omaha).....	TBD
Boys' Golf		
March 27.....	Crofton Inv. (Lakeview GC).....	10 a.m.
April 16.....	Laurel-Concord-Coleridge Inv. (Laurel GC).....	10 a.m.
April 18.....	Plainview Inv. (Plainview GC).....	8:30 a.m.
April 23.....	Lutheran High Northeast Inv. (Norfolk CC).....	9 a.m.
April 25.....	Mid-State Conference (O'Neill GC).....	9 a.m.
April 28.....	Hartington Inv. (Hartington GC).....	9 a.m.
May 2.....	Pierce Inv. (Pierce GC).....	9 a.m.
May 6.....	Niobrara-Verdigris Inv. (Niobrara Valley GC).....	9:30 a.m.
May 7.....	MAC Inv. (Wayne CC).....	9 a.m.
May 11.....	Randolph Inv. (Randolph GC).....	1 p.m.
May 18.....	District C-3 (Norfolk CC).....	TBD
May 27-28.....	State Meet (Holmes GC, Lincoln).....	TBD

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