

Yankton Vaulters Flying High Despite Challenging Spring

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While athletes in other sports have been held hostage by this spring's frenetic weather, pole vaulters at Yankton High School and surrounding teams have found a way to keep at their craft.

First came bouts with snow and cold temperatures. Then came a brief reprieve, in which Yankton hosted the First Dakota Relays last Thursday and a home dual with Sioux Falls O'Gorman on Tuesday.

Then came Wednesday's return to wet and chilly weather.

Through it all, the Bucks and Gazelles vaulters — highlighted by two of Class AA's best, in juniors Casey Skillingstad and James Hofer — have remained dedicated to their technique and made life for their vaults coach Deb Lillie rather entertaining.

"They do absolutely anything and everything that they need to do to get better," said Lillie, who as one of the few female vaults coaches in the state is in her 12th year. "They have interesting personalities, too. It makes practice interesting."

Despite the up and down nature to the season because of weather, consistency hasn't exactly been an issue for the Bucks duo, though.

Each has continued to improve their marks. Skillingstad vaulted 13-feet-3 and Hofer went 12-feet-9 in Tuesday's dual with Sioux Falls O'Gorman.

"This is a technical sport; it's all about working on your technique," Hofer said last week. "Runners can run pretty much wherever, but jumpers and vaulters can't really do that."

Though Yankton has had to do some shuffling with its schedule, its pole vaulters have been able to practice inside the Summit Activities Center.

The facility has an indoor pit in the gym, so vaulters can still work on their

routines. When there is a conflict with the gym, like during the Roger Haas Basketball Tournaments, the pit is put away.

"When it's cold, windy and wet, it's hard to vault," Skillingstad said. "It's nice to have an indoor pit where we can practice."

Of course, even practices mean extra work for everyone — including vaulters from nearby schools like Irene-Wakonda and Gayville-Volin — involved, Lillie said.

"It's a lot of work to be a pole vaulter," she said. "Setting up and tearing down the outdoor pit takes quite a bit of work. That's why you really have to want to vault."

That's where the vaulting community is a rather tight-knit group. During last Thursday's First Dakota Relays, Skillingstad and Hofer did not immediately leave Williams Field after their event. They stayed and chatted with other vaulters — including champion Reagan Francom from Huron.

Deb's daughter, Jordan Lillie who vaults at Bethany College (Kan.), experienced the opposite scene during a meet.

"She said she couldn't believe how the coaches down there didn't get along," Deb said. "They were doing things you just don't see up here. People get excited about everyone else's success in South Dakota."

Hofer agreed, saying all the Yankton vaulters motivate each other. Also vaulting for Yankton are Joseph Kelly (Fr.), as well as Lindsay Larson (So.), Elsie Kotalik (Jr.) and Meggie Steiner (So.) for the Gazelles.

"It's a team effort, you need people to push you," Hofer said. "We're all encouraging each other, and coach Lillie is great with pushing us."

Skillingstad and Hofer, both of whom will look for top finishes this weekend at the Howard Wood Dakota Relays in

Sioux Falls and are already qualified for the S.D. State Meet, have also found ways to push each other, Skillingstad said.

"When James vaults and makes a height, he rags on me that I won't be able to do it too," he said. "It's nice to have him there, though, to push me."

As Lillie pointed out, that trend started a long time ago. Pole vault is proving to be a family tradition, she said.

"It's an extended family. The coaches and athletes, we all want everyone to be successful," Lillie said. "My first group is now getting married and inviting me to their weddings."

Even among the Yankton vaulting group there are family connections. Larson's brother A.J. is a former Buck vaulter, as is Skillingstad's brother Brady. Former YHS vaulter Mark Vetter has two siblings currently competing, Noah and Hannah.

Then, of course, there were the Lillies.

Justin was a Class AA state champion for the Bucks last year in the 110-meter hurdles, and Jordan is a senior in college. Kendall Lillie (So.) is pursuing hurdles too, and her mother joked that she is 1-for-3 getting her kids to vault.

The guys currently vaulting, though, have their eyes on the next big mark.

"Thirteen feet was my goal for this year, so now that I got that, it's on to the next one," Skillingstad, whose next goal is 14-feet, said last week.

If he does that, it would likely come outside — barring, of course, any further weather delays.

"It's been a rough year with everything that's gone on," Hofer said. "We've missed a lot of meets, but it felt nice to finally get outside."

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P&D FILE PHOTO
Yankton's Casey Skillingstad clears the bar during a YHS home track and field meet on April 16. Yankton's vaulters have competed well despite limited opportunities to work out and compete outdoors this season.



P&D FILE PHOTO
Members of the 1997-98 men's basketball team pose with MMC president Joseph Benoit, left, and athletic director Chuck Iverson, right, at the Hall of Fame introduction on Feb. 16 at Laddie E. Cimpl Arena. The team advanced to the semifinals of the NAIA Division II National Tournament, the highest national finish of any athletic team in MMC history.

MMC Hall

From Page 7

A loss in the semifinals of the South Dakota-Iowa Conference semifinals to Dordt put the 11th-ranked Lancers on the brink of elimination. The Lancers got in to the NAIA Division II National Tournament on the final at-large berth, then made the greatest post-season run of any MMC athletic team in history.

MMC won three games to advance to the national semifinals before falling to eventual champion Bethel (Ind.) in a game in which it had a shot in the closing seconds.

The season started with the echoes of the previous season's disappointment still rattling around. MMC had gone 19-9, but had lost four straight and five of six in a stretch late in the season, costing them a SDIC Tourney berth.

"We were in a three-way tie to make the playoffs and didn't get in," said Brock Rops, a senior on the 1997-98 team. "We graduated a good group of guys from the year before — Jason Even (in the MMC Hall), Paul Preister, (current assistant coach) Ted Quinn, Travis Thompson — but we had a lot of guys back. That in itself was important."

While the Lancers returned 11 letterwinners, their depth was tested early. The team lost Mac Rops, a returning first-team All-American, and starter Landon Klock with injuries, but proceeded to win five straight and six of seven, including a 64-49 throttling of NCAA Division II Augustana.

"What made a difference for us was winning against Augustana," said Brock Rops, who tied with Aaron Kranz for high honors with 16 points in the win over the Vikings. "We won without Mac or Landon, and we had a lot of contributions from people who hadn't contributed that way before."

"After that win, when we got Mac and Landon back, we felt like we could be good."

The Lancers showed just that, winning 14 of 16 to end the regular season. Then came the loss to Dordt at home.

"I thought we had let it slip away again," said MMC head coach Jim Thorson, who was in his fourth season with the squad at that point. "I remember being up in my office looking for seeding. It came down to who won what conference."

"We were the last team taken."

The Lancers made the trip to Nampa, Idaho, for the national tournament. For a MMC team that typically played the same teams two and three times a year, the chance to play a program for the first time was refreshing.

"The exciting part of nationals was that we could run a lot of different sets that would be tougher to run in conference," Mac Rops said, referring to the familiarity between conference teams due to the double-round robin schedule. "We went in loopy-goosy and tried to play as well as we could."

After opening with an 87-75 victory over Embry-Riddle (Fla.), the Lancers drew Siena Heights (Mich.). Siena Heights was the national runner-up from a year ago, but the Lancers pulled out a 73-72 victory.

"We played really good defense in that game and held on for the win," Thorson said. "In

the locker room after the game, the players were like, 'Come on, let's go.'

"They had this thing figured out."

MMC beat Mount Vernon Nazarene 74-69 in the quarterfinals, setting up a semifinal berth with Bethel, the defending national champion. Bethel had beaten Briar Cliff 107-100 in the opening round, and had scored a non-conference victory over NCAA Division I Valparaiso 85-75.

"We had them down 16 in the second half and 86-60 with 2:30 to play," Brock Rops noted.

Bethel took the lead, but the Lancers had a shot to tie the game late.

"I've always been of the believe that you let your players make the plays," Thorson said, referring to the fact that he did not use a time out to set up the final play. "If you call a time out, they change defenses on you. We had several scoring options, wings that could shoot, Mac that could drive and good posts."

"We got the ball to Brock and he got a shot up."

While Brock Rops did not make the shot, Thorson felt him making the shot would have been a great moment for a senior who had put in a ton of effort.

"I always felt that Brock had come along as much as any player that season," he said. "When he took the shot, I thought, 'This was his moment.' What a fitting thing it would have been had he made that shot."

Mac Rops repeated as a first-team All-American that season. He, Brock Rops and Kranz, along with Terry Becker, Ryan Krempges and Keith Rasmussen, all were named All-America Scholar Athletes.

Kranz earned second-team

All-American honors the following season. Matt Geiver, a backup on that national semifinal squad, earned second-team All-American honors in 2000.

Chris Dicks, Travis Humpal and Chris Maxwell all earned All-America Scholar Athlete honors later in their careers — they were not old enough to qualify for the 1997-98 season. Ryan Raabe was also on the post-season roster in 1997-98.

Tom Miller and Andy Kappenman, who did not make the post-season roster, also earned All-America Scholar Athlete honors later in their careers.

The accomplishments of the 1997-98 Lancers did not end after they picked up their diplomas. Their achievements lie in a number of fields, including education, business and health care.

"What really counts is what they've done since graduation," Thorson said. "It would be tough to put together any other group of 12. I'd stack them up against 12 from any team at any college."

"They had all the intangibles: intelligence, leadership, good character," he added. "Then you add that to talent and hard work. You get spoiled when a group like that comes along."

Both Mac Rops, who went in to the MMC hall in 2004, and Kranz, who went in last year, said that the team's honor will trump their own individual recognition.

"This means a lot more," Mac Rops said. "I couldn't have done what I did without the coaches and players on those squads."

"This is the perfect way to top off my career, my life at Mount Marty."

Kate (Heine) Pesicka
 When Kate (Heine) Pesicka

left Yankton High School for St. Louis University in 1997, she had planned to leave her basketball playing days behind as well.

Then the game drew her back to Yankton — to cross-town Mount Marty College — where she became the only player in Lancer history to record 1,000 points, 500 rebounds and 500 assists for her career. During her career, she was named SDIC Defensive Player of the Year, as well as an honorable mention All-American.

The gym at SLU was what started Pesicka's road back to Yankton.

"At St. Louis I played pickup games just about every day," she said. "I thought that, if I was doing it every day and enjoying it, maybe I should be playing college basketball."

"I really wanted to play, and I thought my best opportunity was at Mount Marty. It was a place where I knew my family could get to games."

As in her playing career for YHS, where she helped lead the Gazelles to the 1996 Class AA title, she was not a player who would force scoring opportunities.

"We didn't need her to be a go-to scorer," said former MMC women's basketball coach Chuck Iverson. "But she did so many things to make other players better."

That style just fits her personality, Pesicka said.

"I definitely was not a natural born scorer," she said. "I wanted to play defense and create for my teammates. As I got older, the team needed me to score more, but I was not used to that in high school or college."

While Pesicka finished with 1,083 career points, she averaged

9.4 points a game for her career. But she also averaged 4.5 rebounds, 4.4 assists and 2.4 steals per game, and ranks among the Lancers' all-time leaders in both assists and steals. She even had one game in which she recorded career highs of 10 assists and 10 rebounds, but did not score.

"Her toughness was her biggest attribute," Iverson said. "She had a great sense of team. She knew how to make her teammates better players."

Scoring was not Pesicka's focus, but she was efficient at it. She ranks among the Lancers' all-time leaders in three-pointers made (125) and three-point percentage, one of only two players to rank in the top-six in both categories for MMC. She also ranks fourth in free throws made (364) and sixth in free throws attempted (519) in Lancer history.

Besides the three-pointer, one of Pesicka's most effective offensive weapons was the post-up fade-away jumper.

"She had that perfected," Iverson said. "I think she watched a lot of (former NBA standout) Kevin McHale growing up. She didn't miss that shot often."

Pesicka now lives in Sioux Falls with her husband David and three daughters, and teaches math at Sioux Falls Roosevelt High School. She said the connections she made during her playing career are still with her.

"Some of the friendships I made definitely have lasted," she said. "I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I loved everything about Mount Marty."

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