

New-look lineup has boys seeking more success



Photo Credit: Tammy Schmeltz

By Kevin Gordon

Eastwood's boys have a different look this season. Many of the Eagles' returning letter winners are in expanded roles, and many new faces will be in the lineup this season.

Even though Eastwood was hit hard by graduation, the team's goals remain the same — give effort, win a conference championship and qualify as many athletes as possible to the regional and state meets. The Eagles have won 17 straight conference championships, the last six coming in the Northern Buckeye Conference. They're also seeking their sixth straight regional championship and fifth straight district title.

Eastwood's season starts Tuesday at Clay. The Eagles then compete in the Liberty-Benton Invitational Thursday.

"The dynamic of the team is different right now, and that's OK," said Eastwood coach Brian Sabo, who is in his eighth season. "They're all new. We're fairly young with some good senior leadership.

"Sometimes, you don't realize it until they're actually gone, but we had a lot of seniors last season and a lot of key seniors who scored a lot of points and did a lot of events for us. Right now, we're going to rely on a lot of younger kids to step in and fill roles. That always excites me a lot because you're always going to see some kids who received an opportunity and took full advantage of it. It also lets you know how good of coaches you are because you have to coach and teach a lot more."

But Eastwood still has its share of talent.

The team's returning 30 letter winners include NBC champions senior Dalton Andrews in the shot put, sophomore Logan Wendt in the 300 hurdles, senior Isaac Emahiser in the 4x100 relay, senior Billy Barker in the 4x800 and 4x400 relays, and senior Jacob Hahn in the 4x400 relay.

The conference championships earned those athletes first-team All-NBC honors.

"We've always tried, the last four five years, to focus on the effort," Sabo said. "They know if they give great effort, things start to take care of themselves. Then, it's our job to be patient and teach."

Because of the Eagles' youth, they'll have some growing pains during the season. Eastwood traditionally attempts to have its athletes in limited roles during their early seasons, so they're ready for bigger roles as juniors and seniors.

"We're going to embrace failure," Sabo said. "We want them to give effort. We know there are going to be some failures. That's where the patience comes in.

"We tell them we want them to care. If you care, that means you want to fix what is wrong. You don't have to pout. You don't have to throw things. We want you to care enough because you want to fix things and get better."

Four Eagles return after earning second-team All-NBC recognition for being second in the conference meet — junior Erik Fertig in the shot put and the discus, Wendt in the 100 hurdles, Hahn in the 400 and sophomore Jaden Rayford in the long jump. Eastwood also returns eight athletes who were third in the conference meet to earn honorable-mention all-conference recognition.

They are Andrews in the discus; Rayford in the high jump; Emahiser in the 100 and the 200; junior Ceyleon Damron in the 300 hurdles; senior Clayten Vongphachanh sophomore Nate McCauley Benner, and seniors Josh McCauley and Cooper Comes in the 4x200 relay.

Eastwood has 69 athletes on its roster. The roster consists of 14 seniors, 13 juniors, 26 sophomores and 16 freshmen. The Eagles also return eight regional qualifiers and six state qualifiers.

“We have to teach,” Sabo said. “The frustrating part is when you have 69 kids, you can’t teach and get to everyone as much as you want and respect the fact you don’t want them here until 6 or 7 at night.

“We let the points take care of themselves. Focusing on effort allows those things to happen. It takes the pressure off. You don’t have to preach about it (winning) all the time. Our goal is to get better every day.”

But Eastwood is without two key athletes — Andrews and Rayford, who are recovering from knee injuries suffered during the football season. Andrews had surgery to repair his knee. Rayford is undergoing physical therapy.

Andrews was a state qualifier in the shot where he finished ninth. He just missed a trip to state in the discus by finishing fifth in that event. Only the top four finishers in the regional advanced to state.

Andrews might miss the entire season, although he could return for a meet or two at the end of the season.

“You’re losing a lot of points and you’re losing a state caliber competitor,” Sabo said of Andrews. “One thing we still get is his leadership. We don’t get it in the ring, but you get it with him being around, whom he is, how he can talk to people and how he can still help out. His leadership has been so encouraging to watch throughout the years.”

Rayford may return at some point this spring.

“We’re not going to do anything until he’s 100 percent healthy,” Sabo said. “I don’t care if he has to miss the entire track season, so he’s 100 percent healthy and we can get him for another football and track season next year. I’m pretty confident we’ll get him for a little bit this year. But we’re going to make sure he’s healthy and feeling good. If we’re able to get him in just one or two events, I’m fine with that. I’m willing to have it be none because we want him healthy. We don’t want him getting hurt again because he came back too soon, and the same for (Andrews).”