

Eastwood Middle School track teaches life lessons

By Kevin Gordon - May 12th, 2017

On almost every weekday after school, nearly 90 Eastwood Middle School athletes are honing their track and field skills at Freedom Field.

Just as importantly, they're also learning how to be better people.

The Eagles have a combined 85 athletes on their boys and girls teams this season, and the seventh- and eighth-graders are faring well on and off the track.

"We promote it isn't just about being here and running, jumping and throwing," said Stephanie Sims, who is in her 21st season as the program's head coach.

The assistant coaches are Ken Perkins, throws; Eric Rutherford, hurdles, pole vault; Rob Nabors, high jump; and Nathan Howard, long jump, sprints.

"It's about being a good person, getting along with others, treating each other right," said Sims, who also is Eastwood's varsity head coach for boys and girls cross country. "It's about expectations. We have expectations when they come into the program, and we set them right away of what we want and how it is going to be."

"It's doing track the right way and letting that carry over to life," Rutherford said. "When you do track the right way, when you and your teammates are one, you treat your teammates the right way, you treat your teammates with respect, and you treat other teams with respect."

To promote being a good citizen, the coaches hand out L.E.A.D. t-shirts — Leadership, Effort, Attitude and Determination. The t-shirts are awarded every few weeks during the season.

"They're not for the fastest kid; kids can get them even if they don't participate in a meet," Sims said. "They're for kids who do the right things. They help others. They work hard; give everything they have. Kids strive to get them."

The coaches work hard to create a family atmosphere where all of the athletes are treated equally and valued.

"It's a family they feel part of, and that's important," Perkins said. "They feel like they're part of more than the middle school program. They feel like they're a part of something bigger. They see the high school program, and they want to be part of that."

“We expect all of our athletes to watch each other’s events and encourage each other, and when we celebrate victories, we make sure that every member of the team is included,” Howard said.

The coaches have turned track — often perceived as an individual sport — into a team sport.

“I generally believe every single coach cares about every single athlete and wants every athlete to do their best, to have their personal records,” Nabors said. “It doesn’t matter whether they’re first, second or didn’t place. If they get a PR, we acknowledge that. The coaches at some schools give most of their attention to their best athletes, but we give as much attention to our weakest athlete as we do our strongest. That’s consistent through the program. Here at the high school and the middle school, the coaches go above and beyond making sure everyone feels like they are part of it and contributing.”

The middle school program is run like the boys and girls high school track programs at Eastwood. Sims said the middle school program has received great support from the high school coaches during her tenure.

The high school coaches and athletes can be seen interacting with their middle school counterparts during practices and meets. The high school and middle school also help out at each other’s meets.

High school boys head coach Brian Sabo and varsity assistant coach Ethan Downey are teachers at the middle school, where they can begin to build relationships with the athletes in the program and students who might be interested in joining the team.

“Whether it’s little coaching tips to improve a time or distance or just some words of encouragement; there’s no substitute for a genuine one-on-one conversation,” Howard said. “Trust is established when the kids know they matter to us as people, not just athletes, and that trust is the foundation of what the Eastwood track family is all about.”

“By the time they get to the high school program, they already feel like they’re a part of a track family,” Rutherford said.

The skill development and the family atmosphere have helped Eastwood’s middle school boys win 16 straight league championships, spanning the Suburban Lakes League and the Northern Buckeye Conference. The girls have won 13 of their last 15 league titles.

This season’s NBC meet is Friday at Rossford’s Glenwood Athletic Complex. The field events start at 4 p.m. The semifinals of the 100 hurdles, 110 hurdles, and the 200 are at 4:30 p.m., followed by the running finals at approximately 6 p.m.

“We’ve seen enough other high school programs that I’m thankful for our middle school coaches because they are far better than quite a few of the high school coaches we see,” Brian Sabo said. “We’re thankful they’ve been there for years. The consistency is always there. They put kids in the right spot to maximize points for the team. They care about them doing well. They’re disciplined. They care about the sport. We’re very fortunate to have them.”

The high school and middle school coaches share information and attend clinics together.

“We’re talking the same language when we’re teaching the techniques, so the language isn’t foreign to the athletes,” Eastwood high school girls head coach Nikki Sabo said. “We don’t have to start all over from the beginning. We can bounce ideas off each other.”

The middle school coaches enjoy the success of the high school programs. The boys and girls both have won 16 straight league titles, also covering the SLL and the NBC.

“We enjoy seeing them succeed,” Nabors said. “To see (our athletes) go beyond what we saw them do, to see them get pushed to the next level is great.”

Having 85 athletes on the roster is the new normal for the middle school Eagles, who used to have approximately 100 athletes on the team. The Eastwood high school has 78 boys and 58 girls.

“We were way over 100 last year, and now we’re down to 85, but with the way our enrollment has dropped, to be that close to 100 is huge,” Sims said.

The middle school coaches take pride in their athletes who return to the program each season and then invite their friends to join the team.

“If you really think about it, it's not the number of kids we get out for track each year that is really all that impressive,” Howard said. “For me, it's how many kids come back every year or even convince their friends to come out the next year. To me, that speaks to a level of trust the kids have in us to make sure that they are going to have a great experience running track at Eastwood. There is no doubt in my mind, when a kid knows their effort is going to be recognized and valued, they are going to keep giving everything they have.”

Sims said the girls program was “pretty set” when she took over as head coach because the high school program already was successful. It had about 40 girls on the team her first season. The boys hadn’t been as successful and only had 30 athletes during her first team, but they’ve become successful, too.

“We built a tradition, and (joining track) became the thing do in the spring,” Sims said.

The middle school coaches test their athletes in the 100, 400, shot put, standing long jump and a two-minute run at the start of the season.

The tests enable them to have an idea of what events the athletes should compete. They also allow the athletes to try events they’re interested in. They adjust the events as the season goes on, if needed.

“We want them to have fun and improve,” Rutherford said. “They enjoy it. They have fun doing it, which breeds more and more people coming into the program. Now, they want to be part of it.”