

Eagles benefit from family approach



By Kevin Gordon

On almost every weekday after school, approximately 140 Eastwood High School athletes are practicing their track and field skills at Freedom Field.

But Eastwood track and field is about more than running, jumping and throwing. The Eagles' 66 girls and 69 boys are part of one big family, learning life lessons, and how to be better individuals and teammates.

"I want them to feel valued," said Eastwood boys coach Brian Sabo, who is in his eighth season. "I want them to feel they have value, even if they aren't the best 100 person, the best pole vaulter, the best middle distance runner, the best thrower."

"I want them to feel like there's a place for them. I want to instill in them things that will make them better people, trying to give them some leadership things we have seen, been a part of, from other speakers. We just use track and field as the vehicle to teach them to be better people."

Sabo and his wife, Nikki, who is in her ninth season as the Eagles' girls coach, enjoyed being part of a family atmosphere when they were members of the track and field team at Bowling Green State University.

The Sabos have emphasized the same atmosphere at Eastwood. Brian Sabo said it became even more important to him after the Division II state meet in 2012 when his team scored only one point.

"I always thought we were in the family realm, but that season reinforced our approach even more," Brian Sabo said. "I would score one point at state all over again because it was such a great group of guys, especially the seniors. We built great relationships and a lot of great memories."

The Eagle athletes — both past and present — like the approach.

"We push each other on and off the track, that has a ripple effect from the bottom to the top of the team," said Billy Barker, a senior on the boys team. "Whether you have experience or not, we always help each other out. We all care about each other. If someone is having a bad day, we're all there to pick them up and help them out."

"The atmosphere around here is amazing all of the time," said Brianne Kwiatkowski, a junior on the girls team. "We're one big happy family, a lot of good vibes going around. Everyone is just happy all the time, cheering each other on." The family atmosphere helps the athletes connect and become better acquainted with each other, Brian Sabo said.

"Guys and girls, we want to create a family atmosphere," Brian Sabo said. "You might have certain things you don't have in common with other people, but there might be one or two things that you do. We want kids to want to get to know each other. That's part of the family atmosphere."

"They're part of something much bigger than themselves. If we can get them to understand that, they'll be successful at other things in life."

The coaches have benefitted from the philosophy, too, Brian Sabo said.

"We find ourselves a little bit more understanding, a little bit more compassionate, I would do that is this situation now," Brian Sabo added. "We've grown from our experiences."

"Everyone has value to this program, that might be some really intelligent people. They're great students and they came out here and maybe they have something to offer somebody else because they're a good student, they see them in the hall, and say, 'Hey, do you mind helping me with this?' because there's a comfort level with them."

Three seniors on last season's team — pole vaulters Lucas Jackson, Nick Radabaugh and Jordan Slaughterbeck — enjoyed their time with the Eagles.

"We haven't scored many points in the meets, but the coaches still push us just like everyone else on the team," Slaughterbeck said. "If we didn't have this coaching staff, I don't know if would have kept coming back every year."

Because of the team's depth in the pole vault, the three didn't always compete in the big weekend invitationals.

"They make sure everyone feels like they have value to the team," Radabaugh said.

"It's a great atmosphere. You can feel the love between the coaches, between the athletes and between the coaches and the athletes. It's fun to be a part of the team."

Jackson was fourth in his specialty at the Northern Buckeye Conference meet last season. He wasn't scheduled to compete in the meet, but vaulted because of an injury to Jacob Montag, the favorite to win event.

Jackson cleared 11-6 in the meet, the second-best vault of his career.

"The coaches are great because all of them, even the ones who don't coach your event, know your name," Jackson said. "You couldn't ask for a better coaching staff, even if you're not a very good athlete or scoring many points."

"They care more about you growing as a person than performing well," Jackson added. "As long as you grow, they're happy. You want to perform well to reward them more than you do yourself. You see how much they pour into you and you want them to know it's working."

Slaughterbeck and Jackson are roommates at Ohio State University this year, while Radabaugh is attending the University of Findlay.

"A lot of life lessons, and that's one of the biggest reasons I kept coming out," Slaughterbeck said. "It's more than track. They try to make you a better individual, a better teammate."

"You come out and you've got 70 guys supporting you," Slaughterbeck added. "If you have a bad day in your event, you can still walk away with a huge smile on your face because you've got a huge support network. You've got friends and family supporting you. That can only help you perform better."

In addition to the family atmosphere, the Eastwood coaches value every athlete on their team.

"Why wouldn't you want a fourth of your school out being active, learning more goal setting, supporting each other?" Nikki Sabo said. "I'd rather have them out here running and jumping than sitting on a couch. It's a great opportunity."

"We love having an impact on kids," Nikki Sabo added. "I have most of these kids in class. To see them in an athletic standpoint or a music standpoint brings a different dynamic to the classroom, and helps you connect with them."

The Sabos enjoy watching their athletes in other sports and activities at Eastwood. And Nikki Sabo said she can use it as a teaching tool in her sport. She recalled one athlete who was a timid runner, but was aggressive on the soccer field.

"I told her I've seen you knock somebody down going for the soccer ball, and now you need to run your race just as aggressively," Nikki Sabo said.

"You can see their leadership, how they interact with other teammates, interact with other coaches," Nikki Sabo added. "It gives you a sense of who they are and we do care about them outside of track and field. We like to see them excel at other sports and activities. It breeds success and positivity throughout the whole program."

The approach helps ensure every athlete feels valued.

"We push each other on and off the track, and that has a ripple effect from the bottom to the top of the team," Barker said. "Whether you have experience or not, we always help each other out. We all care about each other. If someone is having a bad day, we're all there to pick them up and help them out. That's extremely important. The coaches are always there for us. We know we can go to them about anything."

"Some people don't understand what the main goal of track is which is just to better yourself ... who cares about medals?" Barker said. "We're there to better ourselves and become better people. That'll help us in life, whether it's working a job or doing school work. You learn life lessons from track. It teaches everyone to be a leader."

The Sabos enjoy the life lessons track teaches.

"I want them to have a greater sense of self confidence, self esteem, to have an idea what is meant by goal setting and that it takes a process to accomplish that goal," Nikki Sabo said " It's not going to happen overnight. It's not going to happen the first time you try it.

"If they can take that away, we've done some good things," Nikki Sabo added. "We have a good platform to do it because there's successes and failures, there's not meeting a goal, there's sportsmanship, there's competition, there's competition within your team. That happens in life. We try to instill things for life after high school. Not many go onto college and pro track."

The Sabos also hand out booklets to their teams at the start of the season, involving information about all aspects of the program. The booklets also enable the coaches to learn more about each athlete individually.

"This isn't my saying, but it's my No. 1 quote, 'Kids don't care how much you know until they know much you care,'" Brian Sabo said. "That embodies our whole program. We care about our kids. We care about what they do outside of our program. We care if they're struggling, and we want to help however we can. It's hard. That's a different kind of stress.

"It's all worth it, in the end," Brian Sabo added. "They let you in. That caring really allows you to get on them about effort and things like that. They don't mind if you get on them if they know you care and you're trying to make them better."

And the athletes appreciate the efforts of the coaches.

"I feel like I can go to the coaches with anything. They're always there for us and know what to do," Barker said. "It makes you want to live up to the expectations they have for us, and you want to reward them with the same effort they're giving to us. They're pushing for us to improve.

"The coaches really want us to be good people, that's as much of what this is about," Barker added. "It's just not track. They're really working on helping us grow as individuals. We're all growing together."