

Eastwood boys return to Division II

By Kevin Gordon

Eastwood's boys are back in familiar territory this season.

The Eagles will compete in Division II in the Ohio High School Athletic Association district meet.

Eastwood had spent the last two seasons in Division III, but was in Division II prior to that. The divisions are based on enrollment figures from the OHSA and determined every two seasons.

"The competition will be quite a bit better at the district level, but the regionals are very similar," Eastwood boys head coach Brian Sabo said. "(Oak Harbor) is a tough district."

The Eagles are seeking their sixth straight regional championship and fifth straight district title this season, the last two in both coming in Division III.

Eastwood dominated its Division III district, scoring 174 points last season and 132 in 2016. The Eagles won their district by 118 points last season and 55 points the previous season.

"The Division II district at Oak Harbor has always been really good competition," said Sabo, whose team competed in the Oak Harbor district before moving to the Division III district at Gibsonburg.

The Gibsonburg district was moved to Perkins this season.

"The competition at Oak Harbor, sometimes is better than the regional," Sabo said.

"The district (at Oak Harbor) always seems to have four or five league champions in each event, and only four athletes qualify for the regional. Being in this district (Oak Harbor) made us better. We had to run better times. We had to throw better distances. We had to jump higher."

Sabo said the regionals in Division II and III are similar in terms of state qualifying performances. He compiled a five-year average of qualifying standards needed for state, doing so in both Division II and Division III.

The top four finishers in the district meet qualify for the regional, and the top four regional finishers advance to state. The Division III regional at Tiffin is usually the toughest of the four in the state. The Division II regional is at Lexington.

Eastwood won Division II state championships in 2009 and 2010. The Eagles finished eighth in the Division III state meet the last two seasons.

"Certain events in Division III are tougher each year and certain events in Division II are tougher each year," Sabo said. "When we compared both last year and the year before that, most things that got out at Tiffin would have gotten out at Lexington."

The boys return to Division II also will make life easier for Eastwood's coaching staff. The girls remained in Division II the last two seasons, competing at Oak Harbor for the district meet and Lexington for the regional meet.

That meant the coaching staff had four straight days of meet competition during the week of the district, while also having practice for the team not having a meet.

The boys district at Gibsonburg was held on Thursday and Saturday, while the girls district at Oak Harbor was held on Tuesday and Friday. Oak Harbor hosted two girls districts the last two seasons, resulting in the three-day meet. The Division II boys competed on Wednesday.

But this season, Oak Harbor returns to a Wednesday-Friday meet, the result of having just one boys district and one girls district.

The boys regional at Tiffin was Wednesday-Friday, while the girls and boys regional at Lexington is Thursday-Saturday.

"We had to really look at the schedules for both and figure out who went where," Eastwood girls head coach Nikki Sabo said. "But we're blessed with such a large coaching staff, that all of our kids were able to get the attention they deserve."

Normally, the coaches who had athletes competing in a district or regional final would head to those meets first. The remaining coaches stayed behind to run practice before hurrying to the district or regional meet.

Brian Sabo, who coached the distance runners the last two seasons, had to miss his team's practices during the district and regional meets to be with the 3,200 relay teams. And Nikki Sabo had to miss her team meetings before practice when the long jump was first up in the district and regional meets.

"It will be so much easier," Nikki Sabo said. "When you're on the same schedule, you're going to the same place."

The Eagles also are pleased to be in the same division, so their girls and boys teams can cheer each other on more easily. Although large groups of the boys and girls traveled on their own to each other's district and regional meets, this season will be easier on the athletes.

"They're excited to be together again," Nikki Sabo said. "They didn't like being at separate places. They like being at the same place, so they can support and encourage each other."

Brian Sabo expects the boys to remain in Division II into the future. He said the boys were only approximately five boys below the Division II-III cut line, but are now about 20 boys above it.

"Our enrollment is lower now, so there's always a chance we move back down," Brian Sabo said. "I feel like we'll be in Division II for a while, but one small class enrollment and we could be back in Division III."

The OHSAA and the state coaches association are exploring the addition of a fourth division in track and field, but that wouldn't start before the 2020 season — assuming it's approved by the OHSAA.

Eastwood expects to be in Division III if a fourth division is added, Brian Sabo said.