



March 20, 2015 www.plaintalk.net

Vermillion Track Team Ready to Step Up in 2015

By Alan Dale
The Plain Talk

A Tanager-tough track squad has a mixed bag of stellar talent returning and also has to replace some key point getters heading into the 2015 season.

Vermillion High School's boys' and girls' track teams enter a new campaign under seventh-year head coach Lenni Billberg who does return stellar distance runner, freshman, Maddie Lavin and a cadre of top medley runners, while having to replace Class A state champion shot putter Nick Jensen.

"Losing Nick Jensen in the shot put will hurt the guys," Billberg said. "As a young girls team we did not graduate anyone last season."

But the boys do return four top runners who performed well in the 1,600 sprint-medley and everyone back, including Lavin, on the girls' side.

Lavin took third-place in both the 1,600 and 3,200-meter runs and she is backed by Ashley Schulz and Makenna Koble, with both having been a member during the last season of the 1,600-meter relay medley team that took third-place at state with a school record, 4:18.90.

Also back for the girls are Caitlin Siegel, Katie Kost, Anna Hackemer, Taylor Weber, Maddie Gregoire, and Kasey Jensen.

"We return all of the speed from our state relays of the 4-x-400 and girls' medley," Billberg said. "We just missed qualifying last year in the 4-x-100 and look even faster this year."

By the end of (Lavin's) career she will have rewritten our distance record books. She will break our 800 record and already owns the 3,200 and 1,600 records."

Lavin is sparked by the memory of seeing her most recent cross country season cut down by an ankle injury that took a toll on her state title defense.



Vermillion's Maddie Lavin, left, is back with something to prove to those wondering how she will bounce back from injuries suffered at the end of the fall cross country season. The freshman Tanager is feeling good and ready to do what she does best: compete.

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Now she is back, healthy and a whole lot hungrier. "I am excited and hopefully it can be better," Lavin said. "I am looking forward to a new season, putting in the effort and hopefully getting back to where I was. I wanted (the repeat cross country title) really bad and then came the injuries and it accumulated to a whole lot more than what I thought happened and I was devastated. I was upset with myself. It's really mental for me because I really want it bad this season."

"I want to push myself further. I feel like I am getting stronger mentally-wise too as well as physically... the pressure is on as well because people are looking at you wondering 'is she going to come back? I want to show everybody that it wasn't a one-time thing.'"

Billberg is excited about what some of her other girls' bring to the track. "Other sparks will be seen from Ashley who was cruelly left out of the 100 at state last year by a hun-

dreth of a second," Billberg said. "She has worked hard this year to make sure it is not even close. She will lead off or anchor a number of relays for us this season. MaKenna is another who will start to dominate the 400 in our area as well as be pivotal to all of our relays."

Siegel, a senior thrower in shot and discus is fired up for a chance to shine in her final season as a Tanager. Last year her goal was to make 100-feet in discus and just missed the feat.

"It's my final year because I want to reach my goals and do as well as I can," Siegel said noting she learned a lot from the graduate Jensen. "Nick went all out and it worked for him. That's what I am going to try to live up to that because I have a lot of expectations this year."

"I just have to put my whole body into it and not really care what people think while going as hard as you can. I was a half-inch off (from 100-feet) last

year so I pray I can get it. I want to break the school record (132-2) and I am not really sure where I am but I am sitting pretty well so far (in practice)."

Jeremiah Johnson, Logan Peterson, and Jon Rosales were three of the four state qualifiers on last year's medley relay and they are all back in the fold and should do well as the boys try to overcome the graduation of their shot champ.

"Some runners watch Jeremiah (because) he gets better and better each year," Billberg said. "I look for some great 200's and 400's as well as very strong leadership from him. Logan has also shown signs of a breakout season. He ran some great anchor 800's in the medley last season. We can't wait to get him on the track."

Johnson is feeling pretty optimistic about the 2015 track season and says he and team has matured quite a bit from last year. "Things are going pretty good and we do return

everyone from our medley team," Johnson said. "We can only get better from last year. Last year we didn't have as many guys and we had a lot more freshmen come out so it's a lot more competitive in practice. Instead of four or five guys running with you we have 10, 15 guys now."

"We just have to work hard in practice and you have to push through and run your hardest at all times."

So far this late winter has been one of warm feelings to match the unseasonably rising temperatures.

"I am beyond excited as I leave practice each day," Billberg said. "We have hard working kids who are young and love track and field. Our kids want to be faster, jump higher or further, and throw better each day. This weather has made it much easier to show how much fun track can really be."

The nice weather has been great. To have held full track workouts for two weeks already is pretty exciting, but we can't go too hard yet if we want to avoid injury as the season stretches itself out. Knowing South Dakota though, Mother Nature will have her revenge.

Numbers have also been good for the Tanagers, something that has been hit or miss at times.

"We have our largest squad in four years," Billberg said. "The final tally will be recorded this week as all of the winter season sports outside of swimming are complete. But, as of right now, we have 20 guys and 30 women. Those numbers will continue to change slightly throughout this month."

Despite the positive feelings so far, Billberg still knows the team has plenty of work to do to support their obvious strengths.

"Right now, our strengths are varied," Billberg said. "We have some great relay potential in relays. Mad-

die returns already for her third season with several more to go. The guys are very lucky in that they returned everyone. On both sides we are very young."

"This may hurt us at times as we learn to train a little harder, balance multiple track meets in a week, and keep ourselves healthy."

They will get their first crack at seeing how they stack up when they begin the new season Monday at the Dan Lennon Invitational at the University of South Dakota, which begins at 11:30 a.m.

"The Lennon this year will not be as big as it has been in the past for us," Billberg said. "We have a lot of athletes gone for some regional swimming action. Also, due to extremely stiff competition and large heats, we will not enter in all of the events to allow for our athletes one more week to prepare. We will run primarily relays with a few field event athletes and some 60 dashers. Our big debut will actually be (Elk Point-Jefferson) on April 7 as that is really the first date we will have all of our athletes available to compete."

Billberg expects plenty of tough competition in the region as she sees the Canton, Madison, O'Gorman, and West Central girls as steady threats while boys' teams from Dell Rapids, Lennox and Madison offer plenty of tough challenges.

"The Dakota 12 is loaded in regard to track and will consistently figure in the top at state," Billberg said. "The great thing about all of this though each school has some great athletes in certain events. That is why track and field is so much fun. We will have some events we dominate and others we are young in."

However, the future of Vermillion track and field is really, really bright. We have more guys out that really love to compete. I can't wait to hit the track running."



Senior Brandon Bos (12) finished his University of South Dakota basketball career with a winning record in his final year.

FILE PHOTO

USD Men Finish Season Short of Postseason

By Jeremy Hoeck
Press & Dakotan

The season has officially come to an end for the University of South Dakota men's basketball team.

Coming off a run to the Summit League tournament semifinals under first-year head coach Craig Smith, the Coyotes were not selected Sunday night for the CollegeInsider.com Tournament (CIT) or College Basketball Invitational (CBI).

The Coyotes, at 17-16, not only finished with a winning record for the first time in four seasons, but they won a game

at the Summit League tournament for the first time in three tries. After a first-round win over Fort Wayne, USD lost to rival South Dakota State in last Monday's semifinals in Sioux Falls.

The 32-team CIT, in its sixth year of existence, is designed for mid-major teams, but the Coyotes were left out of the field despite having more wins than five teams who got an invite - including Fort Wayne.

Meanwhile, the 16-team CBI - in its eighth year of existence - featured another Summit League, as Oral Roberts will host UC

Santa Barbara in the first round.

Apart from the size of the field, the biggest differences between the CIT and the CBI is that the CBI uses a 30-second shot clock and a best-of-three championship series. A number of big-name schools decided to decline a CBI invitation, including California, Florida State, Memphis, Minnesota, Oregon State, Penn State and South Carolina.

Between the NCAA Tournament (68 teams), the NIT (32), the CIT (32) and CBI (16), there are 148 post-season spots for the 351 Division I men's basketball teams.

Melstad Named To All Dakota XII Team



Vermillion High School freshman basketball player Haleigh Melstad (with the ball) was named as a member of the Dakota XII Conference First Team on Wednesday. Melstad, was the only freshman listed on the first team and one of only two to get any type of all-region recognition. Junior Tanager post player Twila Sweeney was named honorable mention in the Dakota XII.

FILE PHOTO

COYOTE WOMEN TIP OFF WNIT ACTION

The University of South Dakota women's basketball team opened up play in the Women's National Invitational Tournament Thursday night in Vermillion against Creighton University (17-13).

The host Coyotes (25-7) tipped off against their

neighbors from Omaha and the winner of that game would face either Colorado State or Northern Colorado in the second round at a site and date yet to be determined.

Keep an eye on www.plaintalk.net for updates.