



New Mexico Activities Association Student Spotlight

Heffelfinger & Rauch Lead the Race for East Mountain

By Andreas Steinmetz, NMAA Intern

Most coaches would agree that having two athletes with the same drive, athletic ability and leadership skills is a rare find but that is exactly what Alex Heffelfinger and Addison Rauch bring to East Mountain High School, especially in the sports of track and field and cross country.

Since his early memories of running up and down the street with his mom or trail running with his dad, running has been a long time passion for Heffelfinger. This passion has led Heffelfinger straight into a successful high school track and cross country career.

As a young man growing up around actively running parents, Heffelfinger began running at a young age. His parents encouraged him to get involved in the East Mountain running programs. "My freshman year, I decided to go out for track and it's been my thing ever since. My parents wanted me to go out for cross country my freshman year but the summer before I was really sick so I decided to wait so I could make sure I started my high school career off on a good foot academically." This "good foot" has allowed Heffelfinger to hold a 3.7 GPA through his senior year. "My education is important because it will take me where I want to go later down the line. I'm thinking about becoming a teacher and hopefully a coach."

Heffelfinger's individual state title success began at the State Cross Country Championships in 2014, his junior year, when he took first place in Class 4A, a class that showcased 97 individual runners. "Winning my first time, I really went into the race hoping for a top-3 and I didn't expect to win. When I crossed the finish line, it was the happiest I had ever been. In the last mile, I just had more in my tank. I remember hearing someone yell '500 meters left' and I remember thinking I can go now or I can wait," referring to his final push for the finish line.

To follow up his junior campaign, Heffelfinger went into his senior season with high hopes. "Going into my final year of cross country in 2015, I fully expected to compete for my second individual state title. I wanted to improve on my time from the previous year. This year I knew what to expect so I felt very comfortable and ready to race." Heffelfinger was able to improve on his time by over five seconds and win his second consecutive individual state title.

"Each individual title means something different to me. My junior year I really didn't think I could win but I proved to myself that I could. It was more of an individual thing for me. My senior year, I expected to win but I felt as if it was more of a team effort than an individual one. It was the first time I could stand on the podium with one of my teammates (Isiah Padilla) was a special moment."

The success for Heffelfinger doesn't stop with cross country. He is a two-time champion at 800-meter and a one-time champion in the 1600-meter in his



years on the track team. His love of running led him to compete in 2014 Great Southwest Steeplechase, in which he took first among competitors from seven states.

Now that his high school career is coming to a close, Heffelfinger looks forward to competing at the next level. "I am currently looking at schools in the Northwest part of the country to run collegiately and I have a few options. I hope I get the opportunity." And with his success, that opportunity is sure to come.

For anyone who has competed in multiple sports while in school, we know there can come a time when we arrive at a crossroads and have to make a decision as to which route to take. For Rauch, that crossroad came early her freshman year when she had to choose between volleyball and cross country. Her decision paid off, as she experienced the ultimate success at the high school level and was crowned state champion multiple times.

When Rauch began running track in middle school, she never expected it to lead her through high school and give her a potential opportunity in college. "My freshman year, I had to make a decision between volleyball and cross country and, because I liked running better and I was better at it, I chose to run." This decision came full circle quickly when in her sophomore year she led East Mountain High School to a state championship, becoming the first girls' team from a charter school to win a state championship in New Mexico history. "It was a great feeling to be part of that team and win a state championship. It meant so much to be able to leave that stamp on East Mountain High School."

Although Rauch led her team to a state title, she had placed sixth overall in 4A and was looking to improve for the following season. Going into the 2014 final, Rauch was the favorite to win an individual state title and had the race in her hands until she was taken over near the finish line. "In 2014, I led the entire race and was passed in the final stretch, inside the stadium. I lost by three seconds."

That devastating loss loomed in Rauch's mind for the next calendar year. It pushed her workouts and motivated her to train harder to not let it happen again. "After losing the race by such a narrow margin, it was my fuel the entire season. During workouts and races this year, I kept thinking about Cora (Cannedy, the runner who passed her the previous year). I thought about what she was doing to try and win again and that pushed me every step of the way this year. I told myself that I wouldn't let it happen again."

The year-long training paid off in 2015 when Rauch got her chance to hold the lead and win the state title that slipped from her grasp the year before. "This year I sprinted to the finish line because I wasn't sure where she was behind me. I just thought to myself 'I did it!' I also felt a lot of relief. Finally, all the pieces had come together and my hard work paid off in the end." Her time of 19:11:95 in 2015 was a personal improvement of nearly six seconds from the previous year. Had she run this time in 2014, she would have won by three seconds. Rauch got the ultimate revenge in 2015 in dominating fashion, by finishing 13 seconds ahead of Cora Cannedy, the second place 4A finisher.

This success in athletics will take Rauch to Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Mich., where she plans on running and studying accounting. "I got an academic scholarship and a little money from running. Running is a hobby but my education will take me further in life."