

Linn-Mar girls roar at state track

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - Payton Wensel considers herself an awkward freshman in some respects, but she ran like a gazelle Thursday under blue skies in Des Moines.

Wensel captured the 400 meter dash and helped Linn-Mar win the 4x800 relay as the Lions roared into first place after the first day of the Class 4A state meet.

Linn-Mar junior Stephanie Jenks breezed to victory in the 3,000 meter run for the sixth state title of her record-setting career as the Lions got off to a fast start in the three-day meet.

Linn-Mar leads the pack with 30 points. Pleasant Valley is second with 24 points.

Wensel keeps surprising herself with her performances as a ninth grader.

"It's just incredible," she said breathlessly after winning the 400 in 55.96 seconds, beating the runner-up by nearly a full second. "I'm only a freshman. I'm not supposed to be able to come in here and do this. It's so fantastic."

Wensel, who stands 5-foot-10 and has long legs, has an unusual style in the blocks in the 400 meter dash. She puts her right foot behind her in the blocks for propulsion, but keeps her left foot out of the blocks for balance.

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"My dad coached me to do that, because I'm more powerful doing that coming out of the blocks," she said. "I mean, I'm tall, I'm scrawny, I'm awkward ... It's just going to look weird if I come out of the blocks (with both feet).

"Until I gain some real muscle in my legs, I probably should stick with one foot."



Maddie Saville, Wensel, Hanna Saville and Amber Decker claimed the 4x800 relay in 9:14.75. Wensel ran the fastest leg on the relay with a 2:14.2 split, but all four Lions made major contributions to the triumph.

"It's amazing," said Decker, cherishing the gold medal. "I couldn't have asked for three better people to do it with. They're amazing. I love all of my teammates."

Decker, a junior who has been a fixture for the Lions since she was a ninth grader, snatched the baton out of Hanna Saville's hand for the anchor leg and took off in determination.

"I really wanted it," said Decker. "I'm so proud of them."

Maddie Saville, a senior, called it the pinnacle of her track career. "So far," she remarked, "but we have a lot more ahead of us this weekend."

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Linn-Mar has never won the state title in girls track. In fact, this is the 54th year for the girls state meet and a Metro school has never won the title.

"I think it's a good start," Decker said after the 4x800 relay. "I hope we can do it. I think we can."

Jenks won the 3,000 meter title by nearly 25 seconds in another chapter of her impressive career. She has now won eight titles at the Drake Relays and six titles at the state track meet as just a junior.

"It's been great to achieve all those state titles and Drake Relays titles," she said. "It's really something I've been striving for. My freshman year, that was the one thing I wanted to do. It's an honor to be able to achieve those things."

Kay Beer of Kennedy and Kenzie Soeken of Prairie tied for sixth place in the Class 4A high jump at 5 feet, 1 inch. Maddie Bach of Marion finished sixth in the Class 3A 3,000 meter run in 10:46.73.