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Youth Sports Awards: Team approach leads St. George's girls track to record-setting win at state meet

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The St. George's girls 4x400 relay team, from left, Savvy Briceno, Josie McLaughlin, Georgia Steele and Maggie McLaughlin, accompanied by coach TJ Moulton, won the program's sixth consecutive State 2B championship in the event last month.

By Dave Nichols daven@spokesman.com(509) 459-5441

The beginnings of a dynasty always start off in a unique way. For the St. George's girls track team, a meeting in 2014 between a Spokane running legend and a former Community Colleges of Spokane decathlete at a downtown Starbucks started an instant connection and perfect coaching match at the small private school north of Spokane.

From then on, TJ Moulton and Rick Riley, a record-setting distance runner at Ferris High who later competed at Washington State, have guided the Dragons' track team to bring home team trophies in the last six state meets, shaping the program into one of the premiere track and field schools at the 2B level.

Of those trophies, the 2022 team has proven to be the most dominant and deepest group. The Dragons won the State 2B team title for the third time in school history last month at Eastern Washington University.

For that, Moulton and the St. George's girls track team have been selected as The Spokesman-Review's 2022 Small School Girls Coach/Team of the Year.

"We've had really good teams in the past where we've had two or three stars and then try to fill the pieces around it, but this year's team was just so deep," Moulton said. "It's really the first year we have gotten contributions from track events and field events as we were there in every event."

Behind three relay titles, two individual titles, and an abundance of placers, the Dragons scored 113 points in the three-day meet, defeating runner-up Okanogan by 34 points to win their second title in the past five seasons.

St. George's swept the relay events for the second consecutive state meet, extending its streak to six straight in the 4x400.

"That was just a testament to how deep we are," Moulton said. "We kind of embrace the relay part of track and start every year with a goal to win the relays, and we feel like that kind of branches off for the rest of the team."

The team had just two seniors with state experience, Fair Niven and Maggie McLaughlin, who competed on the 2019 championship relay teams. Niven, a sprinter, competed on the 4x100 and 4x200 teams. McLaughlin, a middle-distance runner, ran on the 4x400 team.

"They helped us a lot this year with a super-young team," Moulton said. "We had two eighth-graders make it to state, a ton of freshman turned out, so they were kind of leaned on all year to kind of be the coaches that were also the athletes and help guide everyone through it."

Niven, who will attend Santa Clara University to study biochemistry, seemed poised for a stellar senior season following a junior season when she was one of the top sprinters in 2B. A knee injury after the 2021 summer club running season resulted in surgery, pausing her momentum.

After the setback, Moulton sat down with Niven and challenged her to take on a leadership role that would help push her teammates to their full potential.

“After Fair’s junior season where she was really dominant at our level, we kind of had to readjust our expectations and goals,” Moulton said. “We talked early on about how she might not be where she was thinking she was going to be, but this was going to be a team deal this year and the goals might be different, but they are going to be a lot more satisfying. She really thrived in that and made as much progress as anyone I’ve seen as a leader.”

Niven made a physical comeback as well. In addition to leading the 4x100 and 4x200 teams to state titles, she also placed second in the 100 and fourth in the 200.

Moulton is fast to heap praise on his other senior, McLaughlin.

“With how consistent she was and no matter what happens the first leg, Maggie’s going to run as fast as Maggie does to get us back in the race if that’s what was needed,” Moulton said. “It’s always comforting having that person that you can trust to chase someone down or hold someone off. That was Maggie and we’re going to miss that.”

McLaughlin did what was expected at state. She ran her relay leg in 63 seconds and held onto the Dragons’ lead to ensure another 4x400 title.

“I was very nervous because my only other experience at state had been my freshman year,” McLaughlin said. “I was remembering all those same feelings going in and this year it wasn’t even that bad.”

McLaughlin, who will run for Vassar College, a Division III program in Poughkeepsie, New York, also placed sixth in the 800 – matching her finish in the event from her freshman year.

This year’s state meet had special significance for McLaughlin aside from helping her team win a state title. She got to run alongside her younger sister Josie in the 800 and team with her in the 4x400. The promising freshman won individual titles in the 800 and 1,600.

“My sister has always been like a powerhouse, and it’s been really fun to watch her compete throughout the years,” Maggie said. “She’ll always pull something crazy out of nowhere and shock everybody.”

That began on the first day of the state meet, when Josie pulled off an upset in the 1,600, running a personal-best 5 minutes, 13.25 seconds for her first state title.

“I never would have thought that’d be a possibility,” Josie said. “When I ran at state and crossed the finish line and saw the time, it was kind of crazy. I didn’t think I’d be able to do that as a freshman.”

She came back on Saturday to PR in the 800 and anchored the 4x400 team.

“It was very exhilarating crossing the finish realizing what I just did,” Josie said. “I worked very hard to get where I am and it was a crazy experience and I was very proud of myself.”

“She’s a pretty special talent and we’ve known that for a while,” Moulton said. “The big part of this season was convincing Josie that she’s that good. She didn’t believe us for a while, but I think she started to figure it out.”

After the events of the past two years, Maggie McLaughlin said the culmination at state was the most rewarding feeling of her high school career.

“With all the work we had put in, it would have been a shame to not have this year,” she said. “Being able to show off all our progress, all the hard work we put in even throughout these past two years we weren’t able to have a state meet, it was just really satisfying. We had an amazing team with such a great bond, and it felt like the perfect way to end.”