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WEEKEND BREAK

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Gary Henley/The Daily Astorian
 Hail dusted the track at The Daily Astorian meet on Saturday in Seaside.

HAIL NO

WEATHER DOES NOT CHILL COMPETITIVE SPIRIT AT THE ANNUAL DAILY ASTORIAN INVITATIONAL

By **DAVID PERO**
The Daily Astorian

The athletes stood on the eight-lane track at Seaside High School, shivering slightly while waiting in their lanes for the starter's command to take their marks.

As if on cue, the already blustery wind picked up and cold, driving rain began blowing across the track. Yet the runners in the girl's 400 meter race of the 29th Annual Daily Astorian High School Invitational last Saturday stood their ground while continuing to stretch and warm up for the race, undeterred even as pebble-sized hail began pelting them and the track.

In that brief moment the girls seemed unfazed as their competitiveness began to surface. For some who were watching, including myself, it brought back memories of years of hard training, running and jumping and the competitive spirit it brought out each time — the internal will to win, the challenge to do your best.

As the hail grew in intensity, the track meet's director quickly waved the girls off the track and told everyone from the 12 participating schools and the spectators to take shelter.

Everyone did, mostly huddling together in welcoming pop-up tents that dotted the track's perimeter, allowing the athletes to rest and dodge the elements. Moments later the track looked like a frozen lake with the white ice completely obscuring the black asphalt surface.

“Like no other”
 As one teenage competitor jogged past heading to the sheltered concession area he told a teammate, “Man this meet is like no other I’ve ever run in.” His teammate, also on the move, quickly chimed back, “Yeah, you sure got that one right.”

Yes, he certainly did. Even in my own seven years of competitive running, I never had to compete with the elements that the teams did last Saturday. Rain, yes. Wind, sometimes. Cold, not so much. And hail, well hail no, we didn’t get much of that in South Florida where I grew up or in Gainesville where I graduated from college.

Within a few minutes Mother Nature’s interference subsided and dedicated volunteers began push-brooming the hail off the track to ensure the safety of the runners. When the events resumed a few minutes later it was as if the weather had never intervened. The sun began peeking through the gray sky and the wind subsided somewhat. The runners were back to their marks and then swiftly sprinting around the track after the starter raised his arm and fired his pistol.

Family and friends yelled encouragement to each runner, even when the competitors were nearly a football field away striding around the track. Like

runners leaning to the finish, spectators lining the track leaned forward to get a better view as each of the runners strained and stretched to cross the line.

It was a close race, with Knappa High School’s Devin Vandergriff winning with a margin of about eight-tenths of a second. Nearly every other event featured exciting finishes, and the field events had their share of dramatic endings, too.

Personal and season bests

Despite the weather conditions, the 300 participating boys and girls posted dozens of personal and season bests in the various events. One of the meet records nearly fell in my favorite event, the 800 meters, with Seaside’s Jackson Januik winning with a time that was only four one-hundredths of a second off the record that had been set in 1993.

The Daily Astorian Invitational is unlike other track meets in that no team scores are kept, the focus is on the individual competitors. Medals are awarded for first place finishers and ribbons go to the second through fifth place competitors in each event. Two boys and two girls are also recognized for outstanding performances in the running events and the field events.

Astoria’s Natalie Cummings, who earned four first place finishes including relays, and North Marion’s Emily Scanlan, who had a first, a second and two thirds, were honored as the meet’s outstanding female runners. Taylor Cosner of Astoria had three podium finishes and Eliza Bannister of Ilwaco had four to earn the awards for outstanding female athletes in the field events.

On the boys side, Seaside’s Juneau Meyer captured firsts in three events, and Vernonia’s Clay Sullivan had a first and two seconds to earn outstanding male runner awards. Warrenton’s Tyler Whitaker had two firsts and two seconds and Astoria’s Tim Barnett had two firsts and a second and were recognized as the outstanding male athletes in the field events.

It was easy to see as a spectator that each of the athletes who competed in the meet gave it their all.

‘Like being a sprinter’

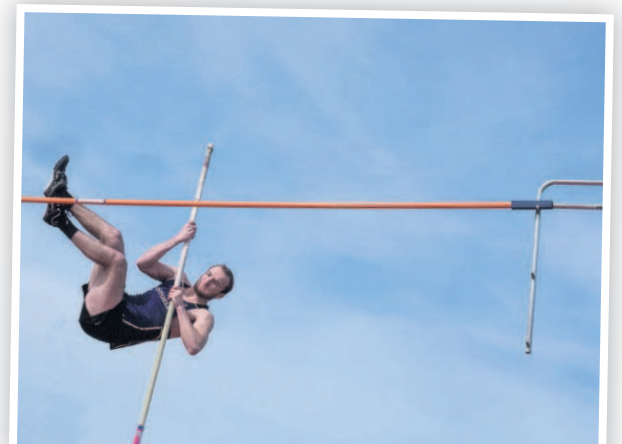
As the great Olympic gold medalist Michael Johnson once said, “Life is often compared to a marathon, but I think it is more like being a sprinter; long stretches of hard work punctuated by brief moments in which we are given the opportunity to perform at our best.”

In watching the meet, I know just how hard those athletes worked to earn those medals and ribbons and how much sense of accomplishment they fulfill and the pride they inspire. Even after all these years I still have all of mine.

David Pero is the editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian.



Damian Mulinix/For The Daily Astorian
 Astoria’s Darian Hageman placed second in the girls long jump with a distance of 15-feet-5.5.



Photos by Damian Mulinix/For The Daily Astorian

LEFT: Seaside’s Phoenix Johnson set a new personal and took third in the boys high jump, clearing 5-feet-8. MIDDLE: Seaside senior Bradley Rzewnicki won the boys 1,500 at Saturday’s Daily Astorian meet in a time of 4:22.53. RIGHT: Astoria senior Cole Olson won the boys pole vault by clearing a height of 9-feet-6.