

Cover story: Wilson carrying on family track tradition in Sterling

By **MIKE COURSON**

The Partridge Family did music. The Flying Wallendas did the circus. The Wilson family in Sterling does its own thing: track. This spring, the family will be back at it with Dwayne Wilson taking over the reins of the Sterling High School track team. Senior Taya Wilson returns as a state champion in the 100m hurdles.

TRACK PARENTS

Before Taya won her state title in 2017, big sister Sydney Wilson won the Class 3A 00m hurdle title in 2016. Sydney just missed a gold in the high jump in her final season, settling for the silver before continuing her career at Wichita State University.

Those state medals are merely a culmination of a life spent on and around the track, thanks to two parents who had their own track success. As a high school senior in 1990, Dwayne won a high jump state title in Colorado. He finished as high as second place in the 110m hurdles and triple jump during his prep career.

“My track career actually began with a field day at Custer County Grade School,” Dwayne recalls. “It was always the highlight of the year for me. My dad, Richard Wilson, was a former high jumper at Western State University and was our high school track coach.

“As a kid, my older sister and brother would go to AAU summer meets and I tagged along running and jumping with them. My brother and I jumped anything we could find, from trees in the yard to jumping over each other. It was always a challenge to see what we could clear.”

After high school, Dwayne moved east where he played basketball and ran track under Ywain Zimmerman at Sterling College. Success continued there as he was the 1993 KCAC high jump champion and competed at NAIA nationals.

While Dwayne was jumping in Colorado, Rene Wilson – then Rene Zimmerman – was breaking all kinds of records in Sterling. She won nine state championships in her Lady Black Bear career. She won the 100m hurdles, high jump, long jump, and triple jump in each of her junior and senior seasons, and she won the high jump as a sophomore.

“I grew up doing gymnastics so it made me pretty powerful,” Rene said. “Actually, I was just falling in the footsteps of my dad, who was a jumper and hurdler. He also pole vaulted. At that time, girls didn’t have pole vault or I probably would have been a pole vaulter also because I just wanted to do whatever my dad had done.”

Rene didn’t just win the golds, she was setting records. When she graduated from Sterling High in 1991, she held five state meet records. Because Sterling moved from Class 2A in 1990 to Class 3A in 1991, Rene held records in both classes in the high jump and triple jump. She also held the 3A long jump record. Both triple jump records still stand.

“I’m especially surprised at the triple jump marks because those were the first two years the triple jump existed at state,” Rene said. “The triple jump started at state my junior and senior years, so those records that are there are the first ones ever set. It’s surpris-

ing they haven’t been broken.

“I was disappointed Sydney never got a shot at my high jump records. I thought it would be fun if she got to break them but they were broken before she got up there.”

Rene’s best high jump of 5-10 is still tied for No. 6 all-time in Kansas. Her best triple jump of 39-6.5 ranks No. 11 all-time in Kansas, and her best long jump of 19-3 still ranks No. 21 in Kansas prep history. Five women have now cleared 20 feet with the best jump of 20-6.5 coming from Little River’s Sandra Myers in 1979.

TRACK FAMILY

The track parents became a track family with the births of Sydney and Taya. After graduating from Sterling College, the Wilsons moved to Hillsboro where Dwayne coached at the high school and Rene coached at Tabor College. Taya attended her first track meet when she was just eight days old.

“(Sydney and Taya) came to practice with me every day and started learning then,” Rene said. “We did summer track together as a family. We had a lot of fun family vacations going to national track meets. I don’t know if we pushed them into it, but we didn’t push them in any other direction.”

“We have pictures back when I was one and two years old of me climbing on the hurdles at Tabor College where my mom was coaching,” said Sydney. “For my third birthday, I asked for little adjustable scissor hurdles and we have pictures of me running over them.”

Rene coached for five years at Tabor before moving back to Sterling College where she coached for 10 more years. All the while, Sydney and Taya continued to make waves on the track scene, often making it to national competitions.

“Doing summer track gave us a really great excuse to go see the United States,” Dwayne said. “Summer track has allowed us to travel to Norfolk, Va., Houston, Detroit, and Des Moines, Iowa for vacations. We have many great memories of those long car trips.”

SYDNEY SIZZLES

Class 2A featured a tough hurdling group when Sydney began her varsity career in 2013. That first season she won four state medals: finished second in the 300m hurdles in 47.16, and ran sixth in the 100s in 15.89. In the field, Sydney tied for sixth in the high jump at 5-0, and placed sixth in the triple jump at 34-8.5.

Still in 2A as a sophomore, Sydney dropped to third in the 300m hurdles and seventh in the 100s. She climbed to second in the triple jump at 35-2.25. Sydney ran the No. 2 300m hurdle time in 3A for her junior season in 2016, and had the No. 5 100m hurdle time. She also had a top-five height in the high jump at 5-3.75 but did not compete at state that season.

That set her up for a big finale in 2016. Sydney entered state with the best 100m hurdle time in 3A and the best high jump at 5-6 in the regular season. She went on to win the state hurdle title by 0.01 seconds in 15.23, finished second in the 300m hurdles in 46.61, and placed second in the high jump at 5-6.

Sydney began her career as a Shocker in 2017. She placed 14th in the triple jump at the Missouri

Valley Conference outdoor championships in May 2017. This season, Sydney will see just a handful of competitions as she and several teammates voluntarily redshirt.

“It is a large time commitment,” she said of being a Div. I athlete. “I’ve been having a lot of injuries this year so that’s been interested to have to struggle through. I love the team atmosphere, I love my coaches here. I really have enjoyed it.”

TAYA’S TURN

From the sidelines, Taya watched her big sister’s accomplishments on the track and field. Like her mom and sister, Taya had plenty of options as a track athlete.

“Hurdles, I didn’t feel pressure to do them but it was one of those things were you want to grow up and be just like your mom,” she said. “That was one of the things when I first started out was like, ‘Oh, mom did the hurdles? I have to do the hurdles, too.’

“Other than that, when I was little I tried to do the throws. I was attempting to be a shot put/discus thrower. As I started to grow up, I realized I was not built for that. But I did start to explore different things in track I could do well.”

In 2015, she began her varsity career. That first season, Taya ran the No. 15 3A time in the 300m hurdles during the regular season. She had the No. 9 triple jump in the class. Unfortunately, a tough regional meant no trip to state.

Taya continued to climb the ranks as a sophomore. During the regular season, she had the No. 9 100m hurdle time in 3A (15.90), the No. 8 triple jump (35-8.5), the No. 9 javelin throw (120-11), and the No. 15 pole vault (9-6).

The hard luck continued in a brutal Class 3A regional just down the road in Lyons. Taya ran



Sterling’s Taya Wilson stood atop the Class 3A awards podium for the 100m hurdles at last year’s state track meet in Wichita. This season, Wilson and classmate Lexi Edwards (far right) will again be among the contenders for state medals in the event. (photo by Mike Courson)

sixth in both hurdle events to miss qualification to state. She placed fifth in the triple jump to miss qualification by a single place, but she did head to state in the javelin, where she placed 10th with a throw of 111-2.

Things took off in 2017. During the regular season, Taya ran the No. 2 3A time in the 100m hurdles (15.52), and the No. 4 time in the 300s (46.87). In the field, she had the No. 4 triple jump (36-7) and the No. 8 pole vault (9-9).

This time around, Taya qualified for state in several events. She went on to place fifth in the triple jump at 36-1.75, two inches behind teammate Grace Rowland. She ran third in the 300m hurdles in 47.35.

Then there were the 100m hurdles. After running a 15.56 for second in the prelims, Taya turned in a 15.34 in the finals to win the title by 0.13 seconds. Teammate Lexi Edwards finished eighth.

“I don’t think I really had an approach,” she recalls. “All I was really thinking was don’t false start. Throughout the season I was always jumpy on the gun, trying to antici-

pate it. All I wanted to do was not false start.

“Once I got out of the blocks in the actual race, I was the last to the first hurdle. I thought, ‘Oh, Taya, you just have to beat somebody.’ Then I beat everybody. That was probably one of the slower starts of my career and one of the fastest finishes.”

“I was so proud of her last year,” Sydney said. “It was always really hard because it seemed like, without fail, we got put in the most difficult regional possible. We had a mini-state meet before the state meet. She always wound up fifth. She would have placed at state but was one place from getting to go. I was really happy for her just to get to go to state, then for her to do as well as she did was amazing.”

Half of the state finalists in the 100s have graduated, and two of the eight finalists in the 300s have graduated, including reigning state champion Miranda Ortiz of Cheney. The field is hers, but Taya knows she can take nothing for granted in her final season.

“I guess you always have the thought of being the state champ and having to practice like one,” she

said. “But when it comes to competition, every race is a new one. You don’t get any time taken off for being the state champion. You have to go out there and run your race and you can’t worry about what anyone else is doing.”

Snagging a record like mom did so many years ago is not out of the question, nor will be a priority this season. “I don’t know if I’m chasing state or school records,” Taya said. “I’m just trying to improve myself. If that catches one of the records, that’s great. If not, that was the best I could do.”

NOT FINISHED YET

The Wilsons are far from done on the track and in the field. Sydney still has her best years ahead of her in Wichita. Taya enters this spring as a state champion and three-time state medalist with a big future ahead. Sophomore Kidist Wilson will move into some varsity events for the Lady Black Bears this season, and freshman Tyus Wilson begins his varsity career already as a state medal contender in the high jump. Seventh-grader Cedric Wilson will be getting his reps in for the middle school squad.

Ellinwood baseball team matches win total in one outing

After 55 years without baseball, the 2017 Ellinwood baseball team nearly went without a win. A regional win proved to be it for last year’s Eagles.

With seven starters back, expectations were a little higher entering Tuesday’s 2018 season-opener in Lincoln. The Eagles rode the arm of sophomore Tyler Knop to win game one 2-0. Lincoln took game two 11-6.

“It helps when you have confidence in your pitcher,” said Ellinwood coach Doug Bender. “Tyler was, overall, our most consistent pitcher last year and he came out and did the same thing Tuesday.

“His curveball was spot on. They only had one kid who hurt us, and he was 3-for-3 with three singles.”

The state only allows 105 pitches and Knop toed the line, throwing 102 pitches in his complete game. He allowed just four hits, walked one, and struck out seven.

Knop had plenty of defensive behind him as Ellinwood made it through the game without a real mistake.

“We played no-error baseball,” Bender said. “Everyone did exactly as we worked all last year and practiced this spring. They did everything we asked them and that was huge. They came out with confidence, they were excited to be on the field.”

Seniors Jacob Herrman and Todd Hamby, and junior Kodie McFarren made their first starts in the outfield.

“None of those three started in the outfield at all last year in those positions,” said Bender. “They were error-free and ran everything down.”

In the infield, freshman Gage Hosman played first base in his first varsity game. Sophomore Ryan Niles worked behind the



plate, and sophomore Luke Wondra played short.

“These were guys playing in places they haven’t played and they were error-free,” Bender said. “That was the greatest, in my opinion. Everybody pulled through and did their job.”

Offensively, the Eagles nearly pulled ahead in the third inning. With the bases loaded, Bender had the heart of his order up with only one out in the book. Some extra adrenaline led to a pair of strikeouts and kept the score knotted at zero.

The shutout remained until the top of the sixth when Ellinwood finally scratched across a pair of runs. Knop helped himself out with a leadoff double to open the frame. David Hammeke followed with a single for the first run of the spring. Hammeke stole second and scored on an RBI-single from McFarren.

Lincoln 11, Ellinwood 6

The Eagles were on their way to a sweep in game two. Ellinwood plated four runs in the first two innings before the Leopards clawed their way back with some big innings late.

Sophomore Kyler Doll walked, then moved around the bases on singles from Hammeke and Wondra. Hamby was hit by a pitch for a painful RBI to give the Eagles a 2-0 lead after one at bat.

Wondra, meanwhile, got the start in game two. After walking

his first two batters, he recorded an out before Bender turned to Brad Shumate in relief. Shumate gave up a quick hit but got out of the jam with just one run on the board.

Ellinwood picked up two more runs in the second to move ahead 4-1. Woodson Corbett and Niles each walked to open the frame, and both came around to score on singles from Doll and Hammeke.

Doll took over on the mound in innings two, retiring his first two batters and allowing one hit in the frame. Lincoln scored three times against Doll in the third to tie the game at four.

Bender again went to his pen in the fourth, this time fetching Hammeke. Lincoln had the answer with three runs to take the lead for good. Ellinwood cut the deficit to 7-6 before Lincoln scored four more runs in the fifth for the final.

“The bright spot on the mound was probably our freshman,” Bender said. “He came through and got us out of a jam early. Take nothing away from Doll and Hammeke, but Shumate was an emergency guy off the bench so we could formulate our thoughts and it helped. He was huge.”

Ellinwood takes a 1-1 record into Tuesday’s home opener against Minneola. The Eagles will host Ellis on Friday. Both double-headers begin at 4 p.m.

“We’re excited because we play Minneola at home on Tuesday,” said Bender. “They were our lone victory last year during regionals. We’re pretty sure they’ll be upset with one, the drive. Two, I’m sure they’ll have their own rendition of ‘Remember the Alamo’ because we’re the guys who knocked them out of sub-state when we weren’t supposed to.”