

Pole vault's last hurrah?

By DREW SHARP
Free Press sports writer

Pole vaulter Brad Darr of Hudson High understands the risks he takes every time he plants his pole into the ground and pushes himself up into the sky. He figures he's taking no more of a chance than a football player when tackled or a hockey player when checked.

But, unfortunately for pole vaulters, Darr's feelings aren't shared by all. Seven athletic conferences banned pole vaulting before the track season started this year rather than comply with the National Federation of High Schools' changes in landing pad specifications set down three years ago.

THE DETROIT CATHOLIC LEAGUE, Southeastern Michigan Association, Macomb-Oakland Conference, Wolverine A Conference, Central Michigan League, Lakeland Athletic Conference and the Seaway Conference dropped the event. An eighth league, the Detroit Public School League, has never had pole vaulting. The Southern Thumb reinstated pole vaulting in March, one month after rescinding it.

Hill Topps, Michigan High School Athletic Association assistant director in charge of boys and girls track, listed three reasons for the banishment.

- **Cost.** Many schools would have had to upgrade their landing pads at costs of up to \$4,000.
- **Liability.** Bupp said some coaches considered vaulting too dangerous and schools didn't want to take the chance of facing litigation should a vaulter suffer a serious injury.
- **Lack of qualified pole vault instructors.** Few schools offer specialized coaching for vaulters. A track coach is responsible for 17 events and may not have sufficient time to devote to pole vaulting.

The federation's new specifications required a vaulting pad to be a minimum of 16 feet wide, 12 feet deep and five feet high. If two or more modules are required, a landing cover over the entire pad is needed. Plus, there must be a four-foot landing cover extending from the main landing pad to the front edge of the planting box to protect the vaulters who might not reach the main pad.

Tom Eschmann, boys track coach at SMA school Southfield, said he "hated" the league's decision to ban pole vaulting but understood its reasoning.

"It would have cost us around \$4,000 to upgrade our pit," he said. "Our budget is not that big. We had a boy I thought was going to be a pretty good pole vaulter for us (teammate Michael Morgan). He quit the team soon after the season partly because we weren't offering the event any longer."

Troy Johansson, from Troy High, another SMA school, participated in a pole vault clinic last summer to prepare himself for this season.

"I don't think it was right for them to drop it, could like they did," said Johansson, who remained on the team as a hurdler. "We've been coached well at Troy. I guess they didn't want to take the chance of anyone getting hurt and possibly getting sued so they just got rid of it for everybody. It's not fair."



Huron Valley Lakeland pole vaulter Scott VanRemortel is one of the favorites in Saturday's state meet.

DARR, defending Class C champion, is still competing this season. He has the top jump in the state at 15-feet-8, the state indoor record. Huron Valley Lakeland's Scott VanRemortel has the state's second best vault at 15 feet. He finished fourth last year and is one of the favorites in Saturday's Class A final.

"We have some of the best facilities in the state (at Lakeland)," VanRemortel said. "Our coaches have done everything to make sure it's as safe as possible. But with any sport, you're going to have the risk of getting hurt."

Darr said ankle injuries are the most common. Those are primarily caused when vaulters land on their feet. Darr recalled an incident at the Manchester Relays this year when an opponent was injured after landing on his feet. Upon landing, Darr said the vaulter's right knee hit his mouth and knocked out four teeth.

But Jack Grant thinks pole vaulting is safer than most sports. Grant is an associate director of the Michigan Interscholastic Track Coaches Association

(MITCA). He is conducting a survey of 638 high school track coaches to determine how prone pole vaulters are to injury. The final results are expected in June, but Grant said he has an idea of what he'll find.

"Pole vaulting is safer than many other activities including football, basketball or hockey," said Grant, who last year retired as Sturgis High's track coach of 29 years.

"I think some schools jumped the gun before they got some facts straight. These people are reacting out of fear. It's MITCA's job to try and stop this movement and educate these coaches and athletic directors more."

Brown City athletic director Kenny Keit was instrumental in getting the Southern Thumb to reinstate the pole vault after it voted 6-2 in February to it.

Reaction

State track preview

Class A

■ **WHEN:** Saturday, preliminaries start at 10 a.m., finals at 1:30 p.m.

■ **WHERE:** Alma College.

■ **ADMISSION:** \$3.

■ **DEFENDING BOYS CHAMP:** Lansing Sexton.

■ **DEFENDING GIRLS CHAMP:** Ann Arbor Pioneer.

■ **FAVORED BOYS TEAM:** Kalamazoo Loy Norris.

■ **FAVORED GIRLS TEAM:** Ann Arbor Pioneer and last year's champions, Detroit Cass Tech.

■ **POSSIBLE BOYS STANDOUTS:** Troy's Keith Wheeler was the only double winner at last year's final, winning the 300-meter low hurdles and 400-meter dash. He's favored to win both. A state record should fall in the 300-meter run. Monroe's Todd Williams holds the record (9:11.8). But he, Lake Orion's Cliff Dweille and Flint Northern's Anthony Hamm all have recorded faster times this year.

■ **POSSIBLE GIRLS STANDOUTS:** Cass Tech's Danielle Rossy ran a state-best 14.3s in the 100-meter hurdles. She'll be favored in both hurdles. Grand Haven's Michelle Redrup could break the state mark in the 200-meter dash.

Class B

■ **WHEN:** Saturday, preliminaries at 10 a.m., finals at 1:30 p.m.

■ **WHERE:** Sturgis High.

■ **ADMISSION:** \$3.

■ **DEFENDING BOYS CHAMP:** Flint Beecher.

■ **DEFENDING GIRLS CHAMP:** Flint Beecher.

■ **FAVORED BOYS TEAM:** Flint Beecher.

■ **FAVORED GIRLS TEAM:** Flint Beecher.

■ **POSSIBLE BOYS STANDOUTS:** There isn't a team that can match Flint Beecher's depth, especially in the relays. Bay City Handy's Joe Garroff will be one of the favorites in the 200- and 400-meter dashes. River Road's James Jackson is Class B's best hurdler. He should be a double winner.

■ **POSSIBLE GIRLS STANDOUTS:** Beecher has Class B's fastest times in the 400-, 800- and 1,600-meter relays. Beecher's Michelle Westbrook could win both hurdles. Auburn Hills' Avondale's Lynn Yagelski is one of the state's best in the discus throw and shot put.

Class C

■ **WHEN:** Saturday, preliminaries at 10 a.m., finals at 1:30 p.m.

■ **WHERE:** Sturgis High.

■ **ADMISSION:** \$3.

■ **DEFENDING BOYS CHAMP:** Southville-Mason County Central.

■ **DEFENDING GIRLS CHAMP:** Detroit Country Day.

■ **FAVORED BOYS TEAM:** Detroit Country Day goes for its fourth straight title.

■ **POSSIBLE BOYS STANDOUTS:** Ecorse sprinter Darrell Starnworth could take the sprint triple (100-, 200- and 400-meter dashes). Detroit St. Martin dePorres' Rodney Carter will challenge Starnworth every step. Defending pole vault champ Brad Darr of Hudson is an inch shy of matching the state record of 15-9, set by Traverse City's Tim Scala in 1984.

■ **POSSIBLE GIRLS STANDOUTS:** Anyone from Country Day could win both. The Evans, Jensen, Sherry and Ploggs should take the sprinting and hurdle events respectively.

Class D

■ **WHEN:** Saturday, preliminaries at 10 a.m., finals at 1:30 p.m.

■ **WHERE:** Traverse City High.

■ **ADMISSION:** \$3.

■ **DEFENDING BOYS CHAMP:** Detroit East Catholic.

■ **DEFENDING GIRLS CHAMP:** Athens.

■ **FAVORED BOYS TEAM:** Detroit East Catholic.

■ **FAVORED GIRLS TEAM:** Litchfield.

■ **POSSIBLE BOYS STANDOUTS:** East Catholic's Why Scott should easily win the long jump and also contribute in the high and low hurdles. No team can match East Catholic in the relays.

■ **POSSIBLE GIRLS STANDOUTS:** Athens has won two consecutive Class D titles but might not be able to match Litchfield's depth.