

Running: Traverse City champ adjusts amid burst to prominence

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Traverse City Central's John Hughes has a little problem.

The senior distance runner would like to go unnoticed, but his talent will not allow that to happen.

"I can handle being in the spotlight, but I try to be a laid-back guy," said Hughes, who is coming off an impressive victory in the 800 meters (1:55.53) at last weekend's Mansfield (Ohio) Mehock Relays.

Hughes was doing a pretty good job of avoiding attention, until last year's Class A state finals.

On a day when the temperature was in the 90s, Hughes sizzled on the Midland High track. His 1,600-meter time (4:10.45) set a state meet metric record, and in the process he defeated defending champion Jason Hartmann of Rockford (4:11.19).

"It did change things for me," Hughes said. "I caught a lot of people by surprise, and I probably took myself by surprise a little bit as well.

"The most overwhelming aspect was the attention from the colleges. One day I'm going to write a book, because it's a lot more stressful than people think. My parents had to play secretary for a while there."

Hughes, who has a 3.3 grade-point average, ended the recruiting calls by signing with Michigan, but there is no way to ignore him on the track.

During the indoor season, he won at the Spartan Relays (1,600 meters, 4:21.51) and the Saginaw Valley Invitational (mile, 4:20.01). Hughes also placed fifth in the mile at the Nike Indoor Classic (4:15.30) against a top national field.

"He's not in the weeds anymore -- he's a known quantity," Central coach John Lober said. "We're just hoping that his progression continues. He's special, no doubt about it."

The special race that many fans would like to see is a 1,600-meter showdown at states between Hughes and Rockford junior Dathan Ritzenhein.

Ritzenhein finished third to Hughes and Hartmann last year, but since that race he has been virtually uncatchable. Ritzenhein has captured two state championships (3,200 meters and cross-country) to go along with two national titles (two-mile and cross-country).

And he proved he could be dominant in the 1,600 as well by setting a state indoor record (4:09.75).

"These guys have a chance to break the record of Steve Elliott, and that goes back to 1975," track historian Jim Moyes said, referring to the Pontiac Central runner whose state-final mile that year converts to a 4:06.6 in the 1,600. "If they stay healthy, it should be one of the great races of all time in state history.

"This could rival the mile race between Lou Scott and Dick Sharkey in the 1962 PSL championship. The Free Press ran pictures at every quarter-mile. It was a tremendous race."

Scott, from Detroit Eastern, beat Sharkey, from Detroit Redford.

That's all lofty stuff, but Hughes isn't ready to abandon his low-key style.

"I try not to put too much pressure on myself when it's not needed, because I have a feeling that things are really going to build up in the next seven or eight weeks," he said. "I just want to be the best that I can be, and hopefully turn a few heads along the way."

RUNNING WITH THE LEGENDS: It has been a labor of love, but Moyes is glad to be nearing the finish line on a book he is writing, which chronicles the history of the Michigan state meet. Moyes said the meet dates to 1898. The book will include this season, and Moyes, a longtime sports broadcaster in Muskegon, hopes to have it in bookstores by next year.

"Everyone knows about the modern-day athlete, but history should be just as big a part of track as it is in baseball and other sports," said Moyes, who has been researching the book for seven years.

Moyes also has compiled a list of the top 100 boys and top 50 girls in state history. Ritzenhein (No. 68) and Hughes (No. 85) are the only current high school athletes to make the cut. But lists are made to be revised, and Moyes will be keeping an eye on an elite group that includes sprinters Charles Rogers (Saginaw), Stuart Schweigert (Saginaw Heritage) and Tiarra Jones (Detroit Cass Tech), and field-event specialists Tom Maczik (Reese) and Becky Breisch (Edwardsburg) for possible inclusion at the end of the season.

Who's No. 1? It's a four-way tie -- Eddie Tolan (Detroit Cass Tech), William Watson (Saginaw), Hayes Jones (Pontiac) and Rex Crawley (Farmington).

The list also includes No. 28 T.J. Duckett (Kalamazoo Loy Norrix), who broke the long-standing shot put record last year; Cass Tech coach and former Detroit Central hurdler/sprinter Thomas Wilcher (No. 37); and Central Lake's Ryan Shay (No. 83), who qualified for the 2000 Olympic trials in the 10,000 meters. Visit www.michtrack.org to view the entire list.

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