

Thrill of competition edges out graduation ceremony for EGR athlete

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By Jane Bos
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Tonight, Joe Crawley and the rest of the East Grand Rapids' senior class are scheduled to don cap and gown, march down the aisle to receive much sought-after diplomas and graduate.

It's the night of nights for the seniors and their parents.

Of course, Crawley won't be among the graduates at Memorial Field. He, along with two other seniors, will be at Houseman Field in blue-and-gold track uniforms competing at the annual John Bos track and field meet.

The best hurdler in the area and arguably in the state, Crawley didn't want to miss a chance to pit himself against the best around.

"Academics always come before athletics, no question," said Crawley, 17. "I would always go to school before an athletic event. But this is graduation. The graduation ceremony is a nice thing to have, but you don't have to be there.

"I felt the benefit of this meet for me was more important than graduation. I love competing. I want to go up against the other good kids."

In order to qualify for the Bos meet, certain times and heights and distances must be met. Athletes from as far away as Muskegon and Traverse City come to compete in the event sponsored by Grand Rapids Community College.

Crawley easily qualified in the 110-meter and the 300-meter hurdles, the 100 dash and the long jump. He and his teammates also qualified in the 400 and 800 relays.

Whichever four events he competes in, look for him to be one of the first to finish.

During the last two seasons, Crawley never lost a 300 hurdles race until the state finals, where he finished a disappointing eighth. And until the Bos meet a year ago, he never lost a 110 hurdler race either. Last season he was edged out at the Bos by Ken Klinger, the defending state champion from Muskegon Oakridge, and then he placed fourth at state.

He hasn't lost a hurdles race so far this season. His area-leading times are 14.3 seconds in the 110s and 38.5 in the 300s.

The 5-foot-11, 145-pound Crawley is the two-time defending O-K White Conference and Division 2 regional champ in both hurdle events. He also holds school records in both events.

At Monday's O-K Conference Champion of Champions meet at Rogers, he set two meet records and won three events. His records -- 21 feet, 53/4 inches in the long jump and 38.53 in the 300s -- came in the pouring rain. He also won the 110s and placed fourth in the 100 dash.

To watch him is amazing. He sprints so fast through the hurdles, he generally nicks most of them along the way without faltering. On Monday, he thrust so much leg strength over the 10th and final hurdle, he cracked off a piece of it during the 110 race.

Afterward, meet directors presented to him the piece of the plastic hurdle -- the "O" in Rogers.

"I've never seen that before," said East's 29-year coach Doug Morse. "I was looking to see if he was limping afterward. It was quite a smash, but he was fine."

Morse admits he's never come across another athlete quite like Crawley.

"Joe is phenomenal," he said. "He wants to go against the best competition, he wants to be pushed, and he's a student of the game. He's the most energetic kid in track and field I've ever coached. He hates to lose at anything.

"I love the kid. He is a great athlete who has a great attitude."

He doesn't make excuses, either.

"I'm real determined, and I want to win, but if I don't, I'll try harder," Crawley said. "I think track is the purest form of athletics. There is no better way to tell who is the better athlete than a simple foot race."

He hopes to prove that he's the best at the June 3 state championships at Grandville High School. He's thrilled to have the event close to home, to sleep in his own bed the night before.

He'll be the top seed at state in the 110s and the second seed (by 1/100th of second) in the 300s. He's also the second seed in the long jump.

And whatever fourth event he does, Crawley will do well there, too.

Next season, he takes his talents to Duke University. The Blue Devils' track and field coach is excited to have him, particularly as Duke is the only school in the Atlantic Coast Conference which doesn't hand out track scholarships.

"Duke is where I've always wanted to go," Crawley said. "It has great academics, and the track team is getting better all the time."

Before he heads to Duke, he needs to graduate. And even though he's missing the official graduation tonight, he agreed with his parents, Gary

and Nancy Crawley, to attend a private ceremony at their house Friday night.

He, along with teammates Alan Gretzinger and Pat O'Rourke, will don cap and gown and walk down the aisle to receive diplomas from school board president Andrea Haidle.

About 35 people, including relatives and friends, will gather for the 5:30 p.m. ceremony. They'll hear Pomp and Circumstance and sit in white chairs and graduate just like the rest of their classmates. Of course, Crawley would prefer to skip this night of nights.

"This is real important to my parents to have it," Crawley said, "so I'm willing to do it."

Whatever it takes. He's a winner and a team player.
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