

Pole vault gaining in popularity with girls

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Grosse Pointe South's Lauren Feringa has been asked if she's crazy for vaulting.

By Joanne C. Gerstner / The Detroit News

GROSSE POINTE FARMS -- Lauren Feringa isn't shy about showing off the bumps and red hints of rug burn on her elbows.

The Grosse Pointe South sophomore earns every scrape as one of the growing number of Michigan girls competing in the pole vault.

"This is a very hard thing to do, but it's so much fun," said Feringa, who holds South's girls record with a vault of 8-feet, 6-inches. "I've been pole vaulting for two years and people ask me if I'm crazy. They think it's dangerous.

"I don't think this is dangerous. You get bumps and bruises, but that's no biggie. It's so cool to see girls doing this."

The Michigan High School Athletic Association introduced girls pole vault as a varsity sport in 1998. The MHSAA doesn't track participation numbers of girls vaulting, but the sport's rise shows in the rate of state finals qualification.

Most schools that offer boys vaulting have added companion girls programs.

In 1998, a total of 51 girls from all classes competed in the Lower Peninsula state vault final. The field grew to 71 girls in 1999.

This weekend, 144 girls will compete for state titles. The MHSAA expanded the finals criteria, sending the top two regional finishers, along with girls who vaulted the standard set for their division. (All division standards were over 7 feet.)

"It's exciting to see girls taking to pole vault," said Greg Miller, the president of the Michigan Interscholastic Track Coaches Association. "It's a change for a lot of people. It takes an open mind to get used to girls vaulting. It was only about five years ago when I saw girls vaulting for the first time.

"I thought, 'What's that?'" But now, everybody sees girls take to the vault and they're steadily getting better at it."

Michigan's girls are improving, with regular meet results and state finals qualifying heights quickly rising.

Stephanie Teeple of Sturgis vaulted over 12 feet earlier this season, while Ashley Carroll of Flint Powers Catholic won her regional with an 11-9.

Thirteen girls vaulted over 10 feet to qualify for the state finals.

By contrast, 1999's four title-winning vaulters were between 8-3 and 10-4.

"You can see the girls getting better each meet, it's all a matter of experience," said Lee Kahler, Bad Axe's veteran track and field coach. "I have two girls on my team, and another six on the junior high team. I can't even imagine how good the junior high girls will be when they're high school seniors.

"Vaulting can be discouraging for girls at first because they don't have the upper body strength. When they're trained right, they can do it."

The lack of upper body strength can make it hard for girls to push off the pole and propel themselves at the right arc to get over the bar.

Girls use lighter poles than boys, as pole weight is matched to body weight. Most girls also take shorter running approaches, a sign of an inability to coordinate faster running speeds and planting the pole in the pit.

Coaches said swimmers or gymnasts take to vaulting the quickest. Both sports develop upper body strength, while gymnasts possess the added advantage of body control in the air.

Ann Ullenbruch, a freshman vaulter at Port Huron Northern, said getting all the techniques together can be hard.

"Turning in the air looks a lot easier than it is," Ullenbruch said. "And what's really hard is learning how to get the pole in the pit the right way. Everybody has accidents and crashes into the pits or falls trying to plant. It can be dangerous, but you have to be careful.

"You get up and keep going. What makes things great is we get to try again."

Ullenbruch's cousin, Northern junior Melissa, posted the top Division I vault (10-3) to qualify for the state meet. Melissa's success got Ann interested in vaulting.

Gary Nesbitt, Northern's coach, said the girls will keep improving as the sport matures.

"You're looking at one of the up-and-coming sports for girls who didn't have a place to go before," Nesbitt said. "They're all good, strong athletes, who are quick runners but not the fastest. Being a vaulter takes a good all-around athlete."

"As we keep going, more girls see they can do this, and more will give it a try. It's a great opportunity for girls to compete in another sport."

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