

Gabby Karas: 12 state titles and a champion's spirit

 khsaa.org/gabby-karas-12-state-titles-and-a-champions-spirit/



Gabby Karas of Collins won the state 1,600 meter title four times, and the 800 and 3,200 twice each. (KHSAA photo by Tim Webb)

BY MIKE FIELDS

SHELBYVILLE — Flashback to May 23, 2014, and the KHSAA Track and Field Championships.

Collins' freshman Gabby Karas, who won the 800- and 1,600-meter races with record-setting times earlier in the day, finishes the afternoon by adding the 3,200 title to her haul.

Karas remembers what happened next: "Everybody in the whole stadium (at UK) got quiet; everyone was waiting. And then the announcer announced I'd broken the 3,200 record, too. Everybody started screaming, and I started crying. It was crazy. It was like a magical movie moment I never thought I'd be lucky enough to have."

The high a runner gets from an endorphin rush may be exhilarating, but it can't match the high a runner gets from a victory rush.

Karas knows the feeling, a dozen times over. She won 12 state titles — 8 in track and 4 in cross country — in her high school career.

The last of those championships came in 2015 when Karas closed her sophomore year by winning the 800 and 1,600 at the state track meet.

Unfortunately, Karas also knows all too well that the highs and the lows in a runner's career are separated only by injury.

She hasn't competed in cross country or track the last two seasons because of — drum roll, please — shin splints, mononucleosis, a concussion, a stress fracture and tendonitis.

Karas, who will graduate from Collins in a few weeks, admits she endured some tough times while dealing with all the setbacks.

"Everything kept coming at me, one thing after another, and I was so stressed out and I couldn't get a grip on anything," she said.

"But I finally came to accept that I did all that I could, and now I'm ready for the next part. I have the next four years to look forward to."

Karas is in a good place now as she takes plenty of time to recover and get healthy before heading off to the University of Virginia this summer.

"I'm a pretty positive person — that's something I learned from my sister Caterina — so I've tried to stay optimistic," Karas said. "When I get to Virginia I'll be surrounded by teammates, and a lot of them have had injuries, too. So that'll make me feel comfortable in the sense that I know other people have been hurt and come back from it.

"I have full faith that I'll be able to come back fully from everything."

Karas first raced to state-wide notice when she won the Class 2A cross country title as a seventh-grader. Caterina Karas, who took top honors the year before as a junior, was runner-up to her little sister.

"After I crossed the (finish) line, I waited for Caterina and she gave me the biggest hug that I'll always remember. She didn't care what happened that day except that we got to race together one last time."

Stephen Drawbaugh, Collins' coach at the time, said Gabby's performance "solidified my thinking that she could be the best girl runner to ever run in the state of Kentucky."

Indeed, that victory propelled Karas to a string of successes. She won the state 1,600 the next spring. She repeated as cross country champ as an eighth-grader, and followed that up by winning the 1,600 and 3,200 in state track in 2013.

As a freshman, she three-peated as cross county titlist (setting a 5,000-meter record of 17:39.04 that still stands), and swept the three distance races in state track.

As a sophomore, she won her fourth cross country crown, and that spring appeared headed to another sweep in state track. After winning the 800 and 1,600, she was leading the 3,200 run when she pulled up and dropped out. She had been battling congestion that week and had trouble breathing.

Karas didn't know it at the time, but that was the end of her high school competition.

Severe shin splints sidelined her from the 2015 cross country season.

She was getting back in shape and ready to resume competition in the spring of 2016 when, in late April, she was in a car accident. A drunk driver crossed into her lane. She suffered minor injuries, including bruised ribs, and a concussion. The concussion was serious enough that she couldn't return to school the rest of the semester.

She took two months off to get well, and by the time her senior year began she was training for cross country.

Then came another serious injury: a stress fracture in her left hip. That sidelined her for five months. "No running, no training, no aqua-jogging, no cycling — nothing," she said. "That was a tough time."



Gabby Karas

She finally got cleared in late February to resume training.

Then along came a case of tendonitis.

“I know. I can’t catch a break,” Karas said with a wry smile.

After consulting with her physical therapists, orthopaedic surgeon and coaches, everybody agreed she was rushing her recovery, So she dialed back her rehabilitation. Her goal is to establish a training base again before heading off to college.

Sean Roberts, who succeeded Drawbaugh as coach at Collins, admires the way Karas never let the series of setbacks keep her down.

“She was so resilient and, for the most part, very high-spirited through it all,” he said. “She had moments when she’d cry on my shoulder, or be upset and wonder if she’d ever run again. But for the most part, she’d pop back up, keep grinning, and say, ‘We got this. We’ll be fine.’”

“The depth of her persistence and tenacity are just overwhelming.”

That’s because Karas loves to run.

“I don’t think winning the race is as important as people think it should be,” she said. “For me, it’s just the beauty of running and trying to beat my previous (personal record). You can’t focus on the people around you. At the end of the day it’s just you on that track or on that course.”

Or in Beckley Creek Park on Sunday mornings, which used to be a favorite part of her routine.

“Running has always been my thinking time, my down time, and a good stress reliever for me as well,” she said.

Kentucky high school cross country and track have missed her the last two seasons.

“I read it once on a forum post on MileSplit that having her in the race makes the race more exciting for everybody,” Roberts said.

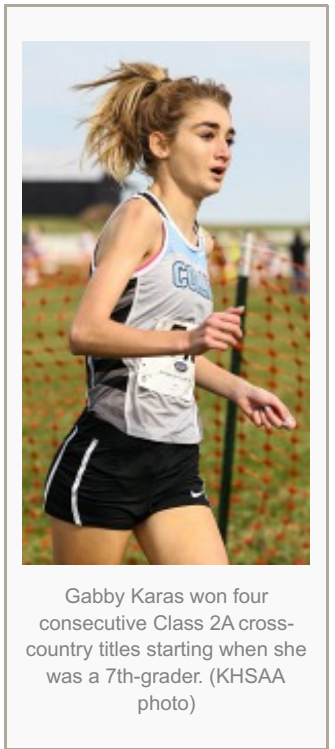
“She has no animosity toward anybody. She hugs her competitors, even if they beat her. She loves everybody and always has smiles for everybody. She’s just a bubbling personality.”

Flashback again to May 23, 2014, and the KHSAA Track and Field Championships.

After Karas won the 3,200, she didn’t trot off in celebration.

“After she crossed the finish line, she turned around and congratulated every girl that came across the line,” Drawbaugh recalled.

“Now that’s pretty cool stuff.”





Gabby Karas won Midway's Cross Country Class 2A Female Student-Athlete of the Year last fall.

 Follow these topics: [FieldsColumn](#)

Copyright © 2017

Kentucky High School Athletic Association. All rights reserved