

Kentucky's Emma Kendall Commits to Murray State University for Cross-Country and Track & Field

Shelbyville, Ky. - Emma Kendall, one of Kentucky's top middle-distance runners, has committed to Murray State University to continue her athletic career at the NCAA Division 1 level. A senior at Collins High School, Kendall will join the Murray State Racers for both cross-country and track & field.

Kendall has an impressive record, with regional, state, and national championship titles, 10 individual school records, and All-State and All-American honors. She was recruited by colleges across the country but chose Murray State for its strong middle-distance program and the guidance of assistant coach Jordan Johnston. Murray State, located in southwestern Kentucky and competing in the Missouri Valley Conference (MVC), is where Kendall plans to call home for the next four years.

"I'm excited to join the Murray State program," said Kendall, who still has one more high school season of indoor and outdoor track. "It was a tough decision with so many great schools, but Murray State felt like the right fit, both academically and athletically."

Johnston praised Kendall's tactical racing and cross-country strength. "For the 2025 recruiting class, I was looking for strong athletes who can train with our upperclassmen and segue into the next generation of 800 runners for the program," Johnston explained. "Every year at the KHSAA state track meet, I noticed Emma and was impressed with how smart she competed. I've watched Emma race with a variety of levels of competition around her and she has handled each of those situations tactically. Her strength in cross-country also was the cherry on the top."



Kendall's running journey began in fourth grade when she qualified for the AAU Junior Olympics. She later ran for the Louisville-based Northeast Striders and Shelby County West Middle School, where she earned multiple state titles, before joining Collins High School's cross-country team in seventh grade. In 2019, as a middle schooler, she shocked the competition by winning the KHSAA Region 3 cross-country meet and finishing eighth at the state championships, earning All-State honors.

Collins' Director of Track & Field and Cross-Country George Sanderlin, who has coached Kendall during the last six years, remembered fondly that first big-race moment for Kendall. At the starting line, just prior to the regional race, he said, "You don't have to go after the leaders all at once," meaning to be patient. But the gun fired, Sanderlin recalled, and Kendall led the race from start-to-finish. "From that point on, I made it a point not to over-coach her, since her race savvy was extremely strong and well developed, even at that young age."

In 2020, Collins made the jump from Class 2A to the much-tougher Class 3A, competing against the top powerhouses from across the state.

Kendall was the top runner for Collins each cross-country season from seventh grade through her senior year. In November, she became the first Collins' athlete to qualify and compete in six consecutive state championships in any sport. Her 5-kilometer personal-best time of 19 minutes, 11 seconds is third all-time for Collins, only behind sisters' Caterina and Gabby Karas, who both went on to compete at the Division 1 level.

Out of all her accomplishments, Sanderlin said the most impressive is the six-year stretch of competing in the state meet. If not for COVID, which canceled all spring sports in 2020, she most likely would have accomplished the same feat on the track. "In my 16 years as a high school coach, I have not coached anyone with her consistency or resiliency."

While Kendall was leaving her mark in cross-country each fall, it was during track season in the spring where she excelled the most. She won a state title in 2022 in the 800 meters, was the Adidas Outdoor National freshman champion in the same event, won back-to-back Region 4 titles in the top region in the state, and now holds seven of the fastest 10 800 times in school history. In indoor track, she holds individual school records in the 200 (27.27), 400 (59.86), 800 (2:17.71), 1,000 (3:06.18), 1,500 (5:02.72), mile (5:29.91) and 3,000 (11:15.60). The 1,000 is also the overall Kentucky state record. In outdoor track, she holds school records in the 200 (26.67), 800 (2:14.66) and 2,000 steeplechase (7:34.16). She also ran anchor legs on three school-record relays, taking her total to 13 school records. Additionally, as a sophomore, Kendall qualified and ran in the prestigious Kentucky Dream Mile, where she finished with her best mile-time of 5:01.73.



Emma Kendall winning the 800 meters at the KHSAA State Track & Field Championships in 2:14. The coaching staff at Murray State believes Emma will be a "stretch-800 runner," which means her main event will be the 800 but someone who can run the shorter relays and cross-country. "I loved that we share the same vision," Kendall said. "It got me even more excited."

"Emma is the humblest and most-determined athlete I have coached," Sanderlin said. "I have not coached an athlete with that much grit and desire."

Kendall has one more high school season to lower those marks. She said her main goals are to improve her 800 time, break five minutes in the mile, win another state title, and help the 1,600-relay team lower its school record.



Emma Kendall leading the 800 meters down the homestretch at the prestigious Eastern Relays— one of the top high school meets in the country each year. Left-to-right includes Ciara O’Shea (who now runs for the University of North Carolina), Reagan Gilmore (University of Florida), Kendall (who will join Murray State University next fall) and Jessica Secor (University of Colorado). From this group, Kendall is the only runner who remains in high school.

“I’m looking forward to my last high school track season,” Kendall said. “To prepare for Murray State, I really want to get my 800 time faster because that’s what I want to focus on at the next level, while also achieving some of my other individual and team goals.”

Kendall currently ranks among the top-20 fastest 800 times in Kentucky history from all classes combined. Phoebe McCowan, who runs for the University of Kentucky, has the state record of 2:09.29 from 2021. Kendall said McCowan’s time is “super fast” but she would love to close the gap. “If I can improve my 400 speed, and stay healthy, then it would be great to get my 800 closer to 2:10.”

In June, Kendall will trade in her light blue Collins’ colors for the navy blue and gold of Murray State. She plans to play a crucial part on the university’s cross-country team in the fall before transitioning to track in the spring. Sanderlin does not think Kendall will have much trouble making the jump from high school to college running. “Emma has been preparing for the Division 1 level since her early days of competing,” he said. “Our long-term goal for Emma was most important – for Emma to be a top collegian and to continue to improve her marks during a four-year Division 1 career.”

Adam Kiesler is in his fifteenth year as the head coach of the Murray State women’s track & field team. The Racers finished runners-up in the MVC in both indoor and outdoor track the last two seasons. In November, they were picked No. 2 in the MVC Preseason Poll.

The Racers have enjoyed individual highlights over the last few years, as well. Kayla Bell, who ran similar times as Kendall in high school, lowered her 800 to an impressive 2:02 to become one of the top middle-distance runners in the NCAA. Chelby Melvin competed in the 400-meter hurdles at the U.S. Olympic Trials last summer with a blazing 56.49. And Murray State has a strong 1,600-relay for this indoor season, returning all of its top runners from a school-record 3:36.88 last outdoor season.

Murray State focuses on the middle-distance events, especially the 400 and 800, which is one of the big reasons why the Racers recruited Kendall so heavily – and why Kendall selected the Racers.

“As a junior in high school, Emma averaged 2:17.7,” Johnston said. “That puts her around five seconds away from making a final in our conference. It is fun to go out and chase PRs (personal records) but ultimately I want to see her running faster than her high school average while being introduced to new training and lifting.

“Long-term, I would like to see her grow in her secondary events, which at this time I believe would be the mile and 1,500,” Johnston added. “Being an xc/mid-distance hybrid athlete is unique and I think she will be impactful on both sides.”

During the recruitment process, Murray State’s head coach – Kiesler – told Emma his vision for her was as a “stretch-800” runner. This meant he sees her main event as the 800 but someone who can run the 400-leg on the 1,600-relay if needed and all the way up to help the cross-country team in the 6-kilometer distance. This is the exact vision Emma sees for herself.

“While I think my best event is the 800 right now, I do really love the team aspects in both the 1,600-relay and cross-country,” Kendall said. “When coach Kiesler told me he sees me as a stretch-800, and even though I never heard that term used before, I loved that we share the same vision. It got me even more excited.”

Murray State competes in track meets all over the country, including meets in Nashville (TN), Columbia (MO), Chicago (IL), Boston (MA), Virginia Beach (VA), Austin (TX), Tampa (FL), and Fayetteville (AK), among others. The Racers have already signed a strong 2025 recruiting class. It includes athletes from Arizona, Illinois, Missouri and Greece, along with a trio of Kentucky athletes: Kendall, Jordin Noah from Fern Creek and Abigail Crask from South Oldham. Noah is a sprinter who specializes in 200- and 400-meter races, while Crask is a distance athlete who excels in cross-country. Because of Kendall’s versatility, she has raced both of them at different times and looks forward to training alongside them starting next school year.

Kendall is currently gearing up for the indoor and outdoor track seasons – her last go-around for Collins. She will open her season at the KYA Indoor Classic at the University of Vanderbilt in Nashville on Jan. 4, followed by the Elite Invitational in Chicago, and the 6-Way Border Battle at Centre College. Her indoor season will conclude at the KHSAA Indoor Track & Field State Championships and, possibly, a return trip to New York for the Nike Indoor Nationals. The focus on the outdoor season will be the KHSAA Outdoor Track & Field Championships, where she hopes to win another state title.

From there, it will be a 250-mile drive from Kendall’s hometown of Shelbyville, KY to Murray State University, where she will join the Racers. In addition to her athletic achievements, Kendall plans to major in exercise science and pursue a career in physical therapy.

“I anticipate Emma’s personality will fit in with both our long-distance cross-country and middle-distance ‘track-only’ athletes very well,” Johnston said. “We are very excited to have Emma join our program. She runs well under pressure and she knows how to win. She doesn’t shy away from competition and I think she will make a smooth transition into collegiate racing.”