

Despite injuries, Souder emerges as team leader



Photo Credit: Danielle DeFalco
Athletes: Sibbersen, Souder, Luidhart

By Kevin Gordon

LUCKEY — Caleb Souder has been a valuable member of Eastwood High School's boys track and field team.

Yes, the same Caleb Souder who has only competed in a handful of meets since the start of last season. The senior has emerged as a student assistant coach and team leader after missing most of the two seasons with an injured hamstring — the right hamstring this season and the left hamstring last season.

Souder is still hoping to return to competition this season, his target date being the Northern Buckeye Conference meet May 11 at Rossford's Glenwood Athletic Complex.

The distance runner turned sprinter hasn't missed a single practice or a meet since he was hurt unless it was to attend rehab or physical therapy. He's also one

of the Eagles' captains.

"I pretty much pray every day to please allow him to compete again for this team. That's for him," Eastwood head coach Brian Sabo said. "He deserves to compete because of everything he's done. There's no time or distance or thing that he will do this year that will make me think or not love him any more than what he's done the last two years.

"He's had a great attitude," Sabo added. "He's helped so many people, coming every single day. That's why he was voted captain. All those guys remembered how much he did last year and what he's done this year. That means the world to me."

If Souder can't return for the conference championships, he's hoping to return the following week when the Eagles compete in the Division II district meet at Oak Harbor.

"I have greater respect for him and all the respect in the world for him, greater than anything he could do on the track or helping us there," Sabo said. "If you're injured, you still have a ton of value to this team."

The injuries

Souder entered his senior season healthy and ran well during the winter indoor season.

He ran a personal-record time of 7.28 seconds in the 60-meter dash, and helped the 4x200 relay qualify for the Division II-III state meet in March.



Photo Credit: Deb Streacker Caleb Souder in the gray sweatshirt supporting teammate Dayquan Oliver.

However, he was unable to run at state because he was finishing his season with the school's basketball team.

"I was feeling good again," Souder said. "My times were faster from what they were last year. It was a natural growth. I was practicing well, competing well. Working with the guys out here, I was having fun."

But Souder injured his right hamstring during the team's season-opening meet March 28 at the Liberty-Benton Relays. He felt good running the 4x100 relay, but felt the hamstring pop during the 4x200 relay.

"Coming around the corner, I was trying to make up some ground up on the guy in front of me," Souder said. "I knew exactly what it was, so I just slowed down."

Last season, Souder injured his other hamstring about 10 days before the team's first meet. He felt pain in the hamstring during the team's preseason mini meet. He came back to run in the Eastwood Relays April 19,

After running in that meet, Souder didn't return last season. But he's still hoping to run again this season.

"Knowing what happened last year, Tony (Eastwood trainer Tony Costello) and I said, let's take it easy and make sure we're back for the important meets, the league, the district, the stuff that really matters," Souder said. "I want to be careful and play it safe, so the same thing that happened last year, doesn't happen this year."



Rest of photo credits: Danielle DeFalco. Picture from 2022 season.

Still shooting to achieve big goals

Souder still is hoping to achieve the goals he set for himself at the start of the season. His goals are to break 11 seconds in the 100 and in the low 22s in the 200, and to help Eastwood qualify at least one relay team to state.

"I had some big goals for myself this year," Souder said. "The way I was feeling and running, I thought I could achieve some of them. I still have those big goals in my mind, but now there are some little goals before that I need to hit to reach that point."

If Souder returns and reaches his goals, he'd rank in Eastwood's all-time top five in both events.

Coping with injuries

The last two seasons haven't been easy for Souder, but a hug from Sabo after he was injured at Liberty-Benton this season helped.

"It's been difficult," Souder said. "Walking off the track after that happened, I was about to break down. Coach Sabo walked over and gave me a hug, and said, 'I love you.' That gave me some comfort in that moment to not lose it."

“In the days following, it’s been difficult to deal with,” Souder added. “I came back to practice and being around the guys and the coaches, that picked me up. When you get hurt on this team, I can’t begin to tell you how many people came up to me and asked, ‘How are you feeling?’ Coaches were checking in with me. It was really nice to hear that. It keeps you going. I had dealt with injuries before, but nothing like this.” Souder said the one positive from being hurt again is he’s started taking better care of his body and his health.



Noah Smith on far left, Souder on right from 2022.

Team leader and coach

Souder started to emerge as a leader last season as a student assistant coach. He was one of two Eagles to miss most of last season with a hamstring injury, the other was sprinter/hurdler Noah Smith. Both thrived as student coaches, and Smith was a team captain. Smith didn’t miss a practice or a meet last season, unless he had a rehab session. Not all athletes continue to attend practices and meets after they are injured. “The culture of our program,” Souder said of why he continued to come to team events. “Everyone here is a family. When I got hurt, everyone was checking on me, picking me up. They kept pushing me to try to get better and

get back. I’m not competing yet, but I still felt exhilarated about the culture I was in. Coach Sabo was a large part of that. He always let me know he cared. Even though he had to take care of the rest of the guys, he was still letting me know he was thinking of me and wanted to help me grow.”

Coming to the team’s practices and meets enabled him to continue to enjoy time with his teammates, especially senior Kaiden Sanchez and juniors Andre Lewis and Dayquan Oliver.

“Those are my good friends,” Souder said. “We’re always pushing each other to get better for the team and individually because that will make the team better. It’s always fun working with them. We have a lot of fun in practice and in meets. It’s fun competing with them.”

Souder helps the team’s sprinters and relays with their events, and also serves as a role model for the team’s younger runners.

“He’s really intelligent,” Sabo said. “He’s always known what to do. He listens well. He has the right things to say.”

Even though Souder has always led by example, he’s become a more vocal leader since he was injured.

“He’s had to talk to a lot of people, so he’s become a lot more social as far as feeling confident in knowing what to say,” Sabo said. “He’s been a lot more outgoing. He’s always been a super quiet kid.”

Souder said he’s grown as a leader since the start of last season: “Helping the guys, the younger guys, the relays was definitely a good growing experience for me to learn a lot, to become better not just as an athlete but as a person.”

Souder added he’ll probably coach at some point in future, whether it be in track and field or basketball.

Souder being chosen as a captain by his teammate is even more impressive because he’s only at Eastwood for one class each day. He has Sabo’s fitness class during fifth period. He’s also taking four Bowling Green State University classes online.



From distance runner to sprinter

Souder’s track and field career started as a distance runner in the seventh grade and he then ran cross country as an eighth grader. But his eighth grade track season was wiped out because of COVID.

He returned to the 800 and the 4x800 as a freshman, but those events caused a stress fracture in his hips late in that season. The following season, he became a sprinter.

“Originally, I wasn’t going to do track because it just seemed to be running a lot of laps,” Souder said. “That’s not who I was. But my sister pushed me to do it, and I had a good time. I’m glad I ran track.”

As a sophomore, Souder finished seventh in the 200 in the NBC meet and helped the Eagles finish third in the

4x200 relay.

“The sprints were a new experience for me, and that was exciting,” Souder said. “It was exciting to challenge myself in a different way, and I loved it.”

Sabo suggested the switch to the sprints.

“We did a couple of things, and we found out he could really help us in the sprints,” Sabo said. “Then, he got even faster. Do I think he could still be an 800 guy? Yes, but I think his hip would bother him if he started running 800 and the distance events. He could help us in the 400 because he has the speed and the endurance for that race.”

What’s next

Souder is undecided on where he’ll attend college, and run track and field next season. He recently visited five NCAA Division II schools in North Carolina and South Carolina, and is still working on a decision.



entrepreneurial mind,” Souder said. “There are so many different paths you can take, finance, accounting.”

“I really enjoyed all five schools, so it’ll be a tough decision,” Souder said. With his post-secondary option classes through BGSU, he’ll have sophomore status when he starts college.

Souder, who has a 4.2 grade-point average, will major in business, but he’s still undecided on what career path he’ll take.

“I like working with numbers and I’ve always had an