

She's beaten runners 5x her age for years. Now frosh star unfazed in HS track



Ridgewood freshman Camryn Wennersten has burst on to the high school scene last fall and winter. But she's been an impressive distance runner long before reaching high school. (Submitted photo)

By JJ Conrad | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

on March 27, 2019 8:00 AM, updated March 27, 2019 1:01 PM

The tale of Camryn Wennersten started long ago, though her narrative still remains far from finished.

At age 6, after seeing her parents run competitively for years at the Ridgewood Run 5K, but forced to wait to compete in order to meet the minimum age requirement, the then multi-sport athlete wanted to give it a try.

She debuted with a 25:13.12 -- a roughly 8-minute mile pace for a 6-year-old who finished 21st overall among all female runners from the village and tops among girls age 9 or under.

At age 9, still not yet fully committed to a life on the track, the [Ridgewood](#) native already was a Level 7 gymnast -- the youngest on her team at that level -- before ultimately giving up the sport in favor of distance running.

By now, you'll start to notice a trend.

At age 10, things got serious when Wennersten stole the show in her newfound passion, again at the annual Ridgewood Run 5K. She clocked in at 19:51.88 -- 57th best overall, including men and women of all ages -- in a field of 1,691 participants.

That year, not only did the fifth-grader crush her 5th-to-8th grade competition by more than 20 seconds, Wennersten also was the No. 1 female finisher from Ridgewood -- *at age 10* -- and seventh female open finisher overall, topping hundreds of runners double and triple her age, or more.

It was then, she admitted, that she knew she had a future in the sport.

"To get under 20 minutes that year, that was a huge PR for me and I knew that I loved everything about running at that point," Wennersten said. "I just kept pushing myself from there."

The dedication to running has paid dividends ever since -- with this past Memorial Day serving as one of the highlights of her young career.

With Ridgewood's high school track and field coach Steve Opremak manning the water station near the finish line with his team at the Ridgewood Run, a 13-year-old Wennersten claimed her fourth straight 10-14 5K first-place finish by well over a minute against her age bracket.

But that was far from the story that day.

Her 17.57.43 -- at a 5:47 mile pace -- placed her fifth among all women and 24th overall, regardless of age or gender, in a field of more than 1,300.

The ages of the Top 10 women overall to finish that race?

Thirty-one, 30, 27, 30, 13, 30, 45, 14 (now-Ridgewood teammate and classmate Olivia Shuttuck), 32 and 28.

And though it was not Opremak's first glimpse of Wennersten -- "the word had been out on her for a while," he said -- it was only a matter of a few months before the future of the program enrolled at Ridgewood High.

That future... is now.

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"[Former Ridgewood coach] Jacob Brown would tell me how precocious she is in her ability," Opremak said of past conversations with the legendary Ridgewood coach who remains involved in track at the youth level.

"How precocious she is to stay focused. How competitive she is. Certain individuals are born to love distance running. They're runners. And she's that prototypical runner. That's just who she is. She just enjoys moving fast."

Two seasons into the high school scene and, Wennersten, now 14 and a freshman with the Maroons, has wasted no time moving fast and continuing her trend of knocking off competition older than she.

It began with a strong debut season in cross country in which won the Big North Patriot and Freedom Divisional title in a personal-best 18 minutes flat and continued when she qualified for both the NJSIAA Meet of Champions and Nike Cross Northeast Regionals.

The success flowed into an even better winter track season.

"You could just see she was going to have success in the workouts very early on," Opremak said.

"Clearly, physically, she's more talented than your average kid. Then having seen her race and seeing how competitive she is, it was obvious. Those two characteristics go hand-in-hand together. You knew she was going to be a force."

The fact Wennersten is competing against upperclassmen, including reigning state medalists, hasn't fazed her in the least -- she's been challenging herself like that, successfully, long before she reached the high school scene.

"When I was younger and competing against kids older than me, I would always just run from my heart," Wennersten said. "I wouldn't think of it as, like, 'Oh, they're older than me. It's fine if I don't beat them.' I go into races believing I'm better than they are. I'm confident in myself."

That confidence flashed at the North 1, Group 4 sectional meet on Feb. 1, when Wennersten doubled up on hardware, racing to titles in both the 1,600 and 3,200, including a 10:44.19 in the 3,200 -- a US#6 at the time.

It remained that way at the prestigious Millrose Games on Feb. 9, with the freshman phenom clocking a sub-5:00 mile (4:56.59) for a 10th-place finish, the only ninth-grader to qualify for the finals in the national event.



Wennersten shown here at this year's Millrose Games. (*Jacob Brown / Submitted photo*)

One week later, at the Group 4 Championships, Wennersten continued to shine, winning the 1,600-meter title while taking third in the 3,200.

And though she came up painstakingly short in the 1,600-meter Meet of Champions final, getting edged out despite a new personal-best (4:59.73) by established Union Catholic senior Jerika Lufrano by .47 of a second -- in a race that featured the state's third- and fourth-fastest times of the season -- the freshman wise beyond her years used that loss as an important learning experience.

It likely won't be the last you've heard from Wennersten.

"Obviously no one likes losing by half of a second," said Wennersten, whose competitive nature derived years ago from growing up with her two older, athletic brothers, Bryce and Tristan. "But I was also proud of myself because it was my first time and I know next year, next season, that I'll be bringing it even more."

The best, Opremak said, is likely still to come.

"She clearly has the ability to be one of the all-time greats."

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