

Z-M's Kovars has transformed into one of the state's best

BY ISAAC TROTTER
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Ethan Kovars doesn't believe in making excuses.

So when his local gym got shut down this summer due to the pandemic, the Zumbrota-Mazeppa senior wasn't fazed.

Kovars decided to construct his own home gym because a lazy offseason is unacceptable to him.

His makeshift gym consisted of a push sled, a heavy tire and a pull-up bar. But that wasn't good enough. So Kovars found some solid branches and connected them with two 30-pound cinder blocks and called it good.

You see, Kovars has goals of winning a state wrestling championship. Every day is valuable. Time is currency. When wrestlers throughout Minnesota wondered if they were going to get a chance to compete, Kovars decided to put his head down and get to work. He knew there was a risk that his senior season was going to get wiped out, but stressing about that wasn't important.

So he pushed the sled, he flipped the tire and he did countless pull-ups. He bench-pressed his branch-cinder block invention and also did curls and tricep extensions.

When the 2021 wrestling season was given the thumbs up, Kovars wasn't behind the 8-ball. He was in tip-top shape. He didn't need to get into wrestling shape. Kovars was basically there already.

He's showing it off now.

Kovars has wrestled at 195, 220 and 285 pounds for Zumbrota-Mazeppa and is 19-1 on the season. Simley's Quayin Short — the Class AA 182-pound state runner-up last year — is the only man who's been able to stop Kovars this year. And even in that Feb. 11 match, Kovars had a chance to win before falling in a hard-fought 10-5 decision.

Simply put: Kovars has been an absolute beast for the Cougars.

"It's been a ton of fun," Kovars said. "I've gotten to wrestle quite a few matches already. I have to be ready every night. We don't have many guys up top, so if they need me to go heavyweight, I'll do it."

Zumbrota-Mazeppa is 12-6 as a team and they knocked off Kasson-Mantorville to end the KoMets' 12-year Hiawatha Valley League winning streak earlier this season.

Legendary Z-M head coach Link Steffen has once again found a way to get the most out of his group.

"It's been amazing," Kovars said. "I couldn't imagine wrestling for any other team. It's great being one of his guys. He just has a different mentality, looks at the sport differently, just so smart towards the sport and life."

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Traci Westcott / twestcott@postbulletin.com

Zumbrota-Mazeppa's Ethan Kovars, left, wrestles Goodhue's Cody Lohman in a 220-pound match during a wrestling triangular on Feb. 23, at Mazeppa.



Post Bulletin file photo by Traci Westcott

Dan O'Hara and Jen O'Hara present Shannon O'Hara Foundation scholarships to Rochester Mayo's Max Cothorn (33), Lourdes' Corrin Hanson, far left, and Century's Megan Andrist, middle, during a hockey game on Feb. 1, 2020, at Graham Arena Complex in Rochester.

'It's great to see her name live on'

Nearly a decade in, O'Hara Foundation flourishing

BY JASON FELDMAN
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Samantha Jones' favorite memories of playing hockey with Shannon O'Hara have nothing to do with goals or assists.

They don't have anything to do with wins or losses, either.

In fact, Jones' favorite memories of her playing hockey with O'Hara nearly a decade ago don't even involve being on the ice.

"We always had the best time in the locker room, just jamming out before games," Jones said with a laugh. "That was our thing. We'd use our equipment and we had a full band, and even had choreographed dances.

"Then my dad or Shannon's dad or someone would come yell at us 'Hey, get dressed! You have to be on the ice in five minutes!'"

That was 10 years ago, months before O'Hara — who became known as "Shannon The Cannon" to her teammates and friends — was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor on April 15, 2011. She was just 12 years old at the time.

From the time of her diagnosis until the time she passed away nine months later, on Jan. 6, 2012, at age 13, Shannon constantly kept her friends and family's spirits up. She showed a strength and determination unlike anything her parents or friends could have expected. She kept playing her favorite sports as long as her body allowed. When she couldn't play, she was at practices or games, or asking often about her teammates and how their teams were doing.

"She didn't want to go to Disney or do anything like that," Shannon's dad, Dan O'Hara, said. "She wanted to be with her buddies, at school and at hockey and at soccer and at golf. That's what she wanted to do. That

PAST SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

2013 — Rebecca Lorsung (Century), Brian Murray (Mayo)

2014 — Katie Aney (Century), Sam Broman (John Marshall), Bethany Gibson (Mayo)

2015 — Mitchell Brandhagen (Lourdes), Jake Dravis (JM), Tori Thompson (JM/Lourdes)

2016 — Abby Marquardt (Mayo), Justin Rein (Mayo)

2017 — Paige Anglin (Mayo), Samantha Jones (John Marshall), Maddie Leque (Century), John Schmitz (Century)

2018 — Claire Brunn (Lourdes), Jason Coyle (JM), Natalie Fink (Century), Max Jones (JM), Maddi Lutz (Mayo), Zach Walston (Lourdes)

2019 — Skylar Klingfus (Century), Ali Ratzloff (Lourdes)

2020 — Megan Andrist (Century), Max Cothorn (Mayo), Corrin Hanson (Lourdes), Sam Williams (Century)

2021 — Josh Hanson (Century), Hayden Jones (Mayo), Katherine Thorvilson (Century), Abby Wick (Lourdes)

was her deal."

Less than a month after Shannon passed away, her impact on her teammates and their families came into focus for the O'Hara's, Dan, his wife Jen and their youngest daughter Erin, who was just 9 years old at the time.

The O'Hara's were asked to step onto the ice between periods of a U14 girls hockey game — the team that Shannon was playing on that season. The family was given a folder that included close to \$5,000 to use to start a charitable foundation in Shannon's name. The money had been pooled together by parents of Shannon's teammates.

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Rochester Century skier Sargent has been in complete control

BY PAT RUFF
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When Max Sargent entered this Alpine ski season it was with one goal — stay upright.

The Rochester Century senior and skiing star has sure done it and with it is considered one of the top racers in the state.

"Last year, I had a lot of trouble finishing races," said Sargent, alluding to his falling in every race but one. "Staying on my skis has been a big deal

ALPINE SKIING STATE MEET

WHEN, WHERE: 9:30 a.m. Wednesday, Giants Ridge.

WHO'S GOING: 168 skiers have qualified, boys and girls combined. Roch-

ester's only qualifier is Century senior Max Sargent. The boys and girls races are run separately.

SARGENT'S HISTORY: This will be the third consecutive year that Sargent has reached state. His highest finish was last year when he finished 36th.

this year."

Sargent has essentially turned last season on its head. In the seven meets he's participated in this high school season, he's fallen just once. With staying upright has come massive success. Other than the race in which he fell, Sargent has finished first in all but one of them. And that one was easy to live with. It came in last week's state-qualifying

Section 6 meet in Burnsville, where Sargent was second to the consensus top skier in the state, Edina's Adam Berghult.

Both will be racing at Wednesday's state meet at Giants Ridge, where Sargent hopes to land in the top five but also can't help but dream about the possibility of stunning the field and walking away the champion.

It will be Sargent's

third straight trip to the state meet. His highest finish so far has been 36th. That came last year and could have easily been much higher had he not lost his balance and spun around, managing to somehow stay upright as he passed through two gates going backwards.

Maybe that was a sneak peek into what would happen this season, with Sargent



Submitted photo

Rochester Century's Max Sargent will be gunning for a top-five finish when he competes in the Alpine state ski meet on Wednesday at Giants Ridge.

refusing to tumble.

"This has been a much more pleasant season for him," said Nick Sargent, who is both the Century coach and Max's father.

"Max has made a big

jump in speed, which makes it harder to control things. But he has had the control this year; he's consistently

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Minnesota forward Taylor Heise (9) reacts after the Gophers lost to Wisconsin 5-3 in an WCHA Final Faceoff women's Hockey game at Ridder Arena on Saturday.

John Autey / Pioneer Press

Wild's Kaapo Kahkonen proving he belongs in NHL

BY DANE MIZUTANI
St. Paul Pioneer Press



Kahkonen

Kaapo Kahkonen has won his past six games, and while it might be too early to be talking goaltending controversy, some would argue it's created tough decisions for the Wild in the crease.

That's not how coach Dean Evason sees it.

"You guys think of it as a tough decision," Evason said. "As coaches, we think of it as an easy decision because we can go either way and we're going to make the right call."

"They have both played well and ping-ponged a little bit off of each other," Evason added. "We are real happy with both guys and we feel very comfortable with either in the net."

That's not bad, considering Kahkonen was expected to spend at least part of this season in the minors.

After general manager Bill Guerin signed Cam Talbot to be the starter this offseason, Kahkonen looked like the unquestioned odd man out with Alex Stalock in line to be the backup.

That wasn't the case as Stalock missed the start of this season with a reported heart condition.

It was a classic Wally Pipp situation from there, as Kahkonen proved too good to take out of the lineup, and Stalock was placed on waivers. He was claimed by the Edmonton Oilers last week.

"It's obviously sad to see him go," Kahkonen said. "I guess that's part of the business. I'm treating everything the same way. Just trying to focus one game at a time."

In other words, Kahkonen isn't changing his approach despite the fact that his spot on the roster is now secured.

"I felt good about my game," Kahkonen said. "I feel like I belong in the NHL. It's still a work in progress. You've got to work every day and every night."

That work has paid off so far as, entering Monday's 7 p.m. game against Vegas, Kahkonen carried a 9-4-0 record, a 2.30 goals against average, and a .918 save percentage. He's actually been better than Talbot in every statistical category.

Asked what's been working so well for him this season, Kahkonen couldn't pinpoint one thing in particular. That probably speaks to how dialed in he is at the moment.

"We have that confidence that if something breaks down in front of us he's going to be there," defenseman Brad Hunt said. "He's such a great kid and has a really bright future in this league. He just keeps it simple. He's not flashy by any means, and when the save needs to be made, he makes it."

That's been especially true away from the Xcel Energy Center.

He has a 6-1-0 record, a 1.73 goals against average, and a .935 save percentage on the road this season.

"I approach every game the same way," Kahkonen said. "I'm not that aware of my stats whether they're at home or on the road. I just know we've won a bunch of games and that's all that matters to me. I'm just happy we've been winning games. We obviously want to win a bunch more games here."

'U' women shocked to be left out of NCAA tourney

BY JOHN SHIPLEY
St. Paul Pioneer Press

Minnesota got one last gut punch from the coronavirus pandemic on Sunday night.

After having the 2019-20 NCAA tournament canceled by COVID last March, the Gophers were left out of the 2020-21 field despite playing arguably the most difficult schedule in the country and being ranked between No. 1 and No. 4 in the two major polls all season.

"Honestly, there's a little bit of shock," said coach Brad Frost, who had gathered his team and staff to watch the selection show streamed live. "It's the ultimate kick in the teeth, to be honest with you, but it won't define this group. They were incredibly resilient this year; they showed up every day."

WCHA regular-season and conference tournament champion Wisconsin (14-3-1) is the No. 2 seed in the March 15-20 national tournament. Conference peers Ohio State (12-6-0) and Minnesota Duluth (11-6-0) made the field, as well.

Northeastern is the No. 1 seed after winning the Hockey East conference tournament. Colgate (ECAC) and Robert Morris (CHA) were the other automatic bids; Boston College and Providence of Hockey East were the other at-large bids.

This will be the first time in Frost's tenure as head coach that the Gophers have missed an NCAA tournament, and the first time since 2006-07. Since then,

Minnesota has been to six title games and won it all four times.

"We were not expecting to see what we saw tonight when those seedings came out," Frost said. "I've got a room full of girls and staff who were devastated to hear the news."

With teams limited to conference play by the pandemic, the Pairwise and RPI rankings used to determine the NCAA field were largely abandoned because there were no head-to-head meetings between Midwest and East Coast teams. Instead, the NCAA selection committee selected the four at-large teams.

That committee comprised Minnesota Duluth athletics director Josh Berlo, Cornell deputy AD Anita Brenner, Boston College coach Katie Crowley, Syracuse coach Paul Flanagan and New Hampshire AD Kate McAfee.

"I'll be very interested to hear the criteria they used," Frost said.

Because of COVID pauses and postponements throughout the WCHA, the Gophers (11-8-1) played 13 of their 20 games against teams ranked in the Top 5 of the major polls all season: Wisconsin, Ohio State and Minnesota Duluth.

They won at least one game against each of those opponents, going 0-4-1 against Wisconsin with a shootout win, 2-4 against No. 3 seed Ohio State and 2-0 against No. 5 seed Minnesota Duluth.

When the Bulldogs were announced as the five seed against No. 4 Colgate, Frost's stomach dropped.

"The Colgate coach texted before

the pairings were announced and said we'll see ya next week," Frost said. "I thought we'd be the 5 seed. I've been doing this 21 years and I thought we were right there in the five spot."

Minnesota finished its regular season Saturday with a 5-3 semifinal loss to top-ranked Wisconsin in the WCHA Final Faceoff semifinals. Minnesota Duluth also lost a conference semifinal on Saturday, 7-2 to Ohio State but beat Wisconsin in regulation in their final homestand, something Minnesota wasn't able to do.

Still, the Bulldogs (11-6) were 2-5 against Wisconsin (1-1), Ohio State (1-1) and Minnesota (0-2).

"I am wondering what they were thinking; you'd think head to head would be the first thing to look at," Frost said. "There's no shying away from the fact that we had eight losses, but they were (against) the No. 1, 2 or 3 team in the country. We had no bad losses and were 2-0 against another team in the field."

BRIEFLY

Frost said he expects at least four of his five seniors to return next season. Grace Zumwinkle, a Patty Kazmaier Top 10 finalist, is a candidate to make the U.S. Olympic team but he has spoken to blue liners Emily Brown and Olivia Knowles, forward Taylor Wente and goaltender Lauren Bench about using their NCAA pandemic waivers to play another year. All were key members of the rotation this season.

YOUTHFUL PRESENCE

While the Shannon Foundation's board is considering a number of ways to give back more to the Rochester hockey and sports community, it is also considering ways to expand and grow, to continue to build on the momentum it has generated over nearly a decade of existence.

In recent months, that has meant the addition of two younger board members, who have brought a fresh perspective to the already-successful foundation.

Erin O'Hara is one. She has taken over the foundation's social media presence.

"I think Shannon would be so excited to see what the foundation has done," Erin O'Hara said. "She'd be excited to see all the 12-year-old girls who tape their stick with lime green tape (Shannon's favorite color) and lace up their skates with lime green laces."

"It's so cool because she wasn't a star player, but she was a team player and a great teammate and person. That was enough. It's so cool and it's something she'd have never expected."

Sam Jones agreed. Shannon's teammate and friend is another young addition to the foundation's board of directors. Jones, 21, is a recent University of Wisconsin graduate, who works for a media company in the Twin Cities. She's officially an "at-large" board member, though Dan O'Hara said Jones "would do anything we asked. If we asked her to be the executive director, she'd do it."

Jones, whose father, Brad served on the board of directors for nearly eight years, is the first former Shannon O'Hara Foundation scholarship recipient to hold a seat on the board of directors. Jones, a JM grad was awarded one of the six scholarships in 2017. Her brother Max was one of the recipients in 2018.

"Shannon was a grade above me in school, but we fell into the same age category, in the U12 program," Jones said. "She was on my first ever hockey team, in Girls City League. I started playing hockey really late, in sixth grade, and Shannon was the one who was nice and welcoming to me right away."

"You could talk to pretty much anyone who played with us and they'd say the same thing. She was the most supportive person and the O'Haras still play that role. I'm just really excited to be back with them, especially as the first past scholarship winner on the board."

EVERYONE KNOWS SHANNON

For a time, the O'Haras wondered what would become of the foundation once Shannon's class graduated from high school and the hockey players going through Rochester's high school programs had never played with or met Shannon.

The foundation, the annual Shannon Cup girls youth hockey tournament, and the O'Haras outreach to youth and high school players every year has not only kept Shannon's memory alive, it's made many young hockey players in Rochester feel like they knew Shannon, even if their age gap didn't allow them to.

"We're in luck that these girls grow up playing in

the Shannon Cup youth tournament, so they have that connection," Jen O'Hara said, "but even the boys players this year, in their essays (as part of the scholarship application process), even though they didn't know her, they have heard stories or know of her."

"We had kids this year write about Shannon's Girls City League team and her playing hockey. They're paying attention."

Jones has no doubts that Shannon would be proud of what her friends and family have built in her name.

"She'd probably say 'I can't believe this!'" Jones said. "She'd just be so proud."

"Up until her diagnosis, I don't think she realized what an impact she had on everyone around her. It's great to see her name live on."

A longer version of this article appears at PostBulletin.com/Sports

Foundation

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"That was special," Jen O'Hara said. "Right away we started doing the work to become a 501(c)(3) and figure out how to become a non-profit. That took us about a year, but how could we not go forward with it? All of these people saying 'here's money in your daughter's memory. Let's do some good with it.'"

The Shannon O'Hara Foundation was born that night in February of 2012. Nearly a decade later, it's not only still active, but it continues to grow.

"We wanted to do something in Shannon's name, even if it was just a memorial of some kind," Erin O'Hara, now 19 and going to college in Philadelphia, said. "We thought, 'what's something that Shannon cared about?' Education, hockey and sports. What can we do with those?"

"It was really cool to watch it grow and be as involved in it as I could be. When I was in high school I wasn't as invested in it; I was playing golf and volleyball. As I get older I realize the value of what we're doing and carrying on my sister's name."

The Foundation's primary purpose since its inception has been to award at least two scholarships per year to high school hockey-playing seniors in Rochester who grew up playing in the Rochester Youth Hockey Association, and who plan to go on to college.

The Shannon Foundation awarded its first two scholarships in the winter of 2013, to Century's Rebecca Lorsung and Mayo's Brian Murray. Since then, it has awarded 30 total scholarships, including four \$3,000 scholarships this year, to Lourdes' Abby Wick, Mayo's Hayden Jones and Century's Katherine Thorvilson and Josh Hanson.

"When you get a diagnosis and you lose a child ... a lot of people have had bad stuff happen to them," Dan O'Hara said, "but you just ... you wonder if you're ever going to be happy again, and it was almost as if this community of people said 'you're going to be happy again!'"

"It really has played such a role in our recovery. It was so substantial in us becoming who we are in our life after Shannon."

The Foundation has raised more than \$300,000 and has awarded more than \$60,000 in scholarships over the past nine years. It also has donated money to brain tumor research.

"Our mission has always been these scholarships for local athletes, as well as brain tumor research," Jen O'Hara said. "One of the challenges with brain tumor research is the amount we're able to give as a small foundation is a drop in the bucket, whereas the money that goes to a kid for a scholarship to go to school can make a big difference."

"One of the things our board of directors is talking about is, how do we do more with the money we have? How do we do more local outreach?"



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