



Fast Times at Sandburg High

Sophomore Lukas Verzbicas may be the brightest up-and-comer in distance running, but his heart and goals belong to multisport

By Jeff Banowitz

Lukas Verzbicas is fast. Historically fast. Record-setting fast. Write your own ticket to Stanford fast. Last year, Verzbicas ran the fastest mile ever by a high school freshman (4:15.43) before setting a national indoor record for the 5,000 meters (14:18.42). He followed that up with a scorching two-mile at the Midwest Distance Festival, where he bested highly touted senior Solomon Haile and broke the freshman record for the two mile by more than 10 seconds (8:53.98).

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Photo by Photomun.com

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p. 36/→ In the fall, he became the first sophomore to ever win the Foot Locker Cross Country National Championship, conquering a muddy and hilly 5K course to win by 15 seconds (15:08). His times at such a young age—he turned 17 in January—have caused many in the distance world to speculate that he could become the most decorated high school runner since Jim Ryun, the first high-schooler to break the four-minute mile.

There’s only one catch: Verzbicas doesn’t run track.

This spring, while most of his cross-country teammates at Sandburg High School are cranking out 800s by the dozen each day after school, Verzbicas is focusing on a different goal. Most days, his parents pick him up after school in the family minivan and drive out to the far western suburbs along the Fox River. Once there, he’ll meet a different set of teammates, who also don’t run track, but who will push Verzbicas to the limit in the sport that has dominated his young life.

Lukas Verzbicas is a triathlete.

And he plans to win the Olympic gold medal.

Hailing from Orland Hills, Ill., a small suburb southwest of Chicago, Verzbicas is a young-looking 17; tall and skinny with bright eyes, sharp features and a quick smile. Like his running hero, Steve Prefontaine, he wears his hair long. He has the type of good looks that would adorn posters on the bedroom walls of thousands of teenage girls—if only teenage girls were into triathlon instead of vampire movies.

Verzbicas came to the United States from Lithuania with his family when he was 9 years old. Both his mother, Rasa Bertule, and stepfather, Roman, were track and field athletes there. His mother was the Lithuanian national champion in the 3,000 meters in

1984 (8:56.79). But when the opportunity came to come to America, she was quick to make the move.

“This is where people come to have opportunity,” she says. “If you have the chance, you have to take it.”

The Lithuanian school system starts kids later than the United States does, which explains why Verzbicas is a year older than most sophomores. But he adapted well once here, becoming a good student who now speaks nearly unaccented English. The middle of three children, Verzbicas’s first exposure to triathlon came at age 11 when he saw an advertisement for the McDonald’s Kids Triathlon, which is held in conjunction with the Chicago Triathlon each August.

His parents signed him up and bought him a bike. He led his fellow 11- and 12-year-olds out of the swim but ended up without an official finish because he only completed one loop of the bike course instead of two. Despite that misstep, he was hooked.

“I’ve always thought triathlon was what I wanted to do,” Verzbicas says. “I just think having the three parts makes it more interesting.”

The sport also appealed to his mother’s views on training.

“I don’t think it’s good for children to be doing the same thing, again and again,” Rasa says. “You want variety at a young age. If all you do is run, run, run, then that’s how you have problems. If you do many sports, you train the whole body. I think it’s healthier to train the whole body.”

So while Verzbicas did compete in cross-country (even winning the Illinois elementary school cross-country title), he and his parents focused on his desire to become a multisport athlete.

And while his parents, both national-level coaches, were more than capable of train-



ing him—and did so with success—they were discovering that triathlon had an issue that most other school-based sports didn’t. Namely, finding other kids who were taking the sport as seriously as they were.

In 2005, at the youth nationals in New Orleans—the week before Hurricane Katrina hit—Rasa and Roman noticed a team of young triathletes from Illinois wearing Multisport Madness jerseys; so they tracked down the team’s coach, Keith Dixon.

“At some point during that weekend, they approached me and told me about their son,” Dixon recalls. “They said, ‘Our son is a very good runner,’ and I said, ‘Well, this is triathlon.’”

It’s a distinction that Dixon had been drawing since first founding the team in 2002.

He remembers, “I started calling my triathlon friends and asked them: ‘What if you took kids and trained them in triathlon the way a competitive swim team would train them?’ No one was doing that. And a lot of people were calling me crazy. But I talked to my swimming coach, my mentor, and he thought it was a great idea. So we gave it a shot. Now seven, eight years later, one of my first 10-year-olds was just ranked the fourth best in the world last year. And people are calling me to find out how we’re doing it.”

Dixon has developed a program that basically follows his initial hunch, that triathlon should be treated as a sport of its own, not something that swimmers or runners stumble into after college.

Members, mostly from the **p. 40/→**

p. 38/→ far western Chicago suburbs, may participate in some school-sponsored sports, such as swimming or cross-country, but only as part of a broader plan to improve the kids' triathlon skills.

"If an athlete needs improvement in swimming, it may make sense for him to compete on the high school swim team," Dixon says. "But we look at that as a step toward the larger goal."

Dixon took his first group of kids to the junior national championships in 2003. "That was an education," he says. "But I learned what we were up against, and what we'd have to do to get there."

He set the goal of winning the team national championships by 2005—which he did.

"It was our first of five consecutive team

Triathlon is a sport—and I think everyone around here can see the potential Lukas has in the sport."

"I want to win a gold medal in triathlon," Verzbicas says with matter-of-fact determination. "I've had lots of running people tell me that if I were just running, I'd be a great runner. But I think I'm just as good a triathlete, if not better, than I am a runner. So I'm going to stick with triathlon for now."

His mother echoes those sentiments.

"We don't look back on everything he's done so far," she says. "We keep in mind the big goal, which is the Olympic gold medal. And every day, he works toward that goal."

That means Verzbicas has committed to his triathlon training the same as an elite gymnast or figure skater would—often with the same sacrifices to his social life.

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championships and 18 individual championships," Dixon says. "These are just neighborhood kids that have worked really hard. It shows you what kind of success is possible when you treat triathlon as its own sport."

Verzbicas, while he didn't become a full-fledged member of Multisport Madness right away, did start training with them and developing a multisport resumé to perhaps rival his running accomplishments.

By 2008, he was the top-ranked 13- to 15-year-old boy triathlete in the United States. In 2009, at just 16, he won the junior ITU Duathlon World Championship in Concord, N.H., defeating 19-year-olds like Spain's Mario Mola, who had won the junior world triathlon title two weeks earlier.

"The running community doesn't understand this," Dixon says. "Lukas is a great runner, but he has potential to be a world champion triathlete for many years. Running is a closed community, like swimming is. And it can't think outside the box.

"It's tough," Verzbicas admits. "I get picked up from school, drive 50 minutes and then work out for four hours—and then come home to do homework. But I wouldn't be doing it if it weren't something I wanted."

This summer, Verzbicas is focusing on qualifying for the junior triathlon world championships in Budapest in September. In the fall, he'll return to cross-country as a junior to improve upon last year's successes.

"I'll focus on that once it comes," he says. "I don't want to say anything right now. But it will be a goal to improve from last year."

And as for those Olympic dreams, he and his mother may consider a shot at London in 2012.

"It's probably going to be 2016, but why should we limit him?" Rasa says. "It's still two years away, so you never know what can happen."

After all, Verzbicas is used to defying expectations. **CM**

Great High School Athletes

Lukas Verzbicas set an American record, won a world championship and dominated two sports before entering his junior year. And he isn't the first high school athlete to raise high expectations.

JIM RYAN: The first high school runner to break the four-minute mile in 1964. He would go on to set a world record in the mile; in 1968, he finished second to Kip Keno in the 1,500 meters at the Olympics to take home the silver medal.

ALAN WEBB: Webb broke Ryan's 36-year-old high school record by running 3:53.43 at the Prefontaine Classic in 2001. Since then, he's won multiple national titles in the 1,500 and finished fifth at the U.S. Olympic Trials in 2008, failing to qualify for Beijing.

LEBRON JAMES: James petitioned to enter the NBA draft after his junior year of high school. It was denied, but some of his high school games were aired nationally on ESPN. He was drafted number one overall by the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2003—and according to some has even exceeded expectations to become an NBA MVP.

LANCE ARMSTRONG: Before becoming the king of the Tour de France, Armstrong was a highly regarded triathlete, ranked number one in the United States in the 19-and-under category in 1988. At 16 he became a professional and won the spirit-distance championships twice before he dropped triathlon to concentrate on road cycling. Good move.

BRYCE HARPER: This catcher left high school two years early to pursue a professional baseball career. His high school numbers were off the charts, but it was a 509-foot home run at Tampa Bay's Tropicana Field—the longest ever in that stadium—that took him to LeBron James' level of interest and the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. He's expected to be the first pick in the baseball draft this year.