

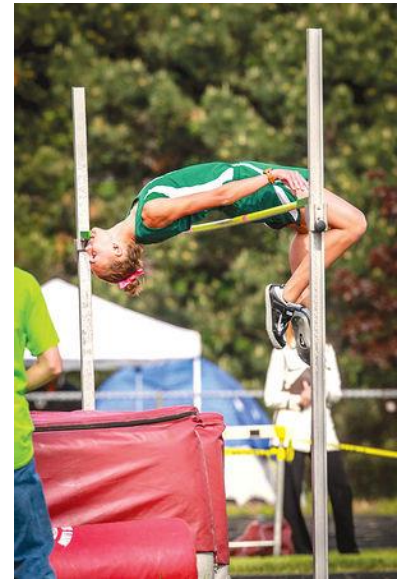
Dakota senior Kayla Dobies has time of her life during High School Heisman ceremony

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Macomb Dakota senior Kayla Dobies plans to study neuroscience and medicine at Princeton University. Dobies, a finalist for the 2015 High School Heisman award, is pictured during the 2015 Macomb County track and field championships. (Photo by Patricia O'Blenes)

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — She was so unassuming, she thought it was a prank.

“(Macomb Dakota Athletic Director Mike Fusco) pulled me into his office to talk about a scholarship he thought I could win,” said Dakota senior Kayla Dobies, a three-sport athlete who also sports a grade-point average that’s in the top 1 percent of her class. “It was really weird, but I thought nothing of it at the time. I just thought he had a lot of confidence that I could be the first Dakota kid to win this particular scholarship.

“Then he walked me to lunch — also unusual — and I walked into the atrium and saw my guidance counselor, plus my coaches and our principal. I honestly thought it was an assembly on bullying or something like that. Next thing I know, cameras are in my face and (Dakota Principal Paul Sibley) whispers in my ear, ‘You have no idea why you’re here, but just smile, OK?’”

That’s how Dobies, who competes in track and field, cross country and basketball, found out she had been named a national finalist for the 2015 High School Heisman award. Dobies was one of 10 high school seniors in the nation selected to take a trip to New York for the ceremony. Students from more than 29,000 schools across the U.S. are eligible to apply for the award.

Students apply for the award independently. The application asks prospective winners to answer four short-answer questions and to include a list of achievements. The 10 finalists stayed at The Marquis Marriott in Times Square.

“It was a long application,” Dobies said. “Once I found out I was going to New York, I couldn’t believe it. It seemed like a dream. I swear — I thought I was on ‘Punk’d’ or something.”

According to the High School Heisman website, eligible students must maintain at least a 3.0 grade-point average. Applicants, all high school seniors, also need to be proven leaders and role models within their school and community, and must perform in at least one of the 43 school-sponsored sports recognized by the International Olympic Committee in the summer and winter Olympic Games or the National Federation of State High School Association.

Once a student applies, a winner from each school is chosen to advance to the state finals. One male and one female winner are chosen from each state and the District of Columbia, totaling 102 state winners, who earn \$1,000 donations to the winning students’ schools.

A panel selects 10 national finalists from the state winners. Two national finalists are selected from each of five regions. National finalists receive an invitation to the Wendy’s High School Heisman Weekend, including the national awards banquet in New York City, a gold medal, and a Wendy’s High School Heisman National Finalist Heisman patch. The eight national finalists not selected as national winners receive a \$100 Wendy’s gift card, and a \$2,000 school donation is awarded in the student’s name. That means Dobies has earned Dakota \$3,000 to be put toward improving student life at the school.

National award winners are recognized during ESPN’s national telecast of the NCAA Heisman Trophy presentation, a Wendy’s High School Heisman Trophy, a Wendy’s High School Heisman National Winner patch and a \$500 Wendy’s gift card. In addition, a \$5,000 award will be donated to the winner’s high school in the student’s name. The 2015 events took place Dec. 11. The first High School Heismans were handed out in 1994.

Zach Hughes (Missouri) and Taylor Campos (Illinois) won the 2015 awards.

Dobies’ accomplishments made her very deserving of the trip to New York. Along with her athletic prowess, she serves as a member of the National Honor Society. Dobies, who will attend Princeton University and study neuroscience and pre-medicine, is an AP scholar with honors. The Dakota senior, among many other things, also serves as a student council class representative, is a volunteer math tutor and mentor for middle school track athletes, and is a second-degree taekwondo black belt assistant instructor. Along with her classes at Dakota, Dobies last summer and fall took classes at Macomb Community College.

So how is Dobies able to excel at seemingly anything she does?

“Not sleeping,” she said jokingly. “No, seriously, school and learning is something I really enjoy. Unlike most stereotypical teenagers, I can call myself weird. I’m also a huge nerd because I actively teach myself stuff like neurobiology. I’m also running my own research and hope to get published (soon).

“I do have a lot on my plate, but I love what I do. I do lose sleep at night, but I have a thirst for knowledge.”

Dobies is a three-year captain and four-year letter winner for the Dakota girls cross country team. She is a three-year letter winner with the Cougars’ girls track and field team and has earned All-State honors twice.

Tom Zarzycki, Dobies’ track and field coach, said he’s proud of Kayla and everything she’s accomplished. He said he noticed her high level of determination the first time they met.

“Every day she shows up trying to improve herself and is always there trying to help others improve,” Zarzycki said. “Win or lose, she always wants to know how she can become better and understands that everything she does has to have a purpose.”

Dobies relished her time in New York. She was able to skate at Rockefeller Center and see the Rockettes perform.

“Our banquets were in insanely fancy halls with important people everywhere,” Dobies said. “The restaurants were those fancy places where the meal is seven courses and each course is one bite. We were at the center of it all. There’s nothing like Times Square at Christmas.”

Even with all her accolades and recognition, Dobies thinks about how her time at Dakota is coming to an end.

She said she'll miss Zarzycki the most.

"I have been crying about leaving Dakota since the cross country divisional meets," Dobies said. "I'm going to miss (Zarzycki) the most. ... He was the reason I got into running. He talked me into it when I was high jumping the summer before my freshman year of high school. I owe him a lot and plan on coming back as much as I can."

Zarzycki is confident that Dobies will have many more great moments in her future.

"I see her accomplishing so much more," he said.

Dobies' accomplishments come as she has battled asthma her entire life. She has taken several medications to combat the ailment and uses inhalers and a breathing machine. It affects her during the cross country season, particularly later in the season when the temperatures start to dip.

An accident that Dobies suffered as a toddler left her partially deaf. She competed in gymnastics and, she said, loved to do flips on her head.

"At home, I would flip over the couch and soon my spinal cord began to decompress, and I developed pinched nerves in my neck," Dobies said. "Eventually, my hearing began to fade. We were told it was degenerative. My family planned for me to be totally deaf one day."

Dobies' grandmother took her to a chiropractor as a last resort. Her hearing began to return within a few months.

"It turns out it was due to the spinal compression on my nerves," Dobies said. "I honestly got really lucky."

Despite those possible deterrents, Dobies has persevered. She has a simple motto that she follows.

"You can't let the things that may hold you back in life win," Dobies said. "The monsters under your bed can't be your undoing. Just because you have an immense battle in your life doesn't mean you can't overcome it. That gives you more reason to fight.

"When people tell you that you can't do something, you go out there and you prove it not only to them, but yourself too. At the end of the day, proving to yourself that you can do something is the greatest award, honor and achievement of them all."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Staff Writer Jason Carmel Davis covers prep sports throughout Macomb County. Jason has worked for C & G Newspapers since 2011 and graduated from Michigan State University.

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