

AAU track gives athletes another chance to compete

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ROCKFORD —

On a mildly breezy Tuesday evening, a group of young girls and boys practiced jumping over hurdles around the track at Lutheran High School.

For some it was a new experience as they lifted their legs high over the bar trying not to touch the top, while others went through the routine with ease and displayed textbook form.

The youngsters were members of the Rockford FIRE summer track and field program, which is open to area youth 7-18 years old and provides three levels of participation from recreational to advanced. The FIRE stands for Fostering Identity, Recreation and Education for youth.

“Our goal for the Rock River Valley is to engage as many kids as we can in safe positive constructive activity in what will keep them healthy and well interested in teamwork and goal-setting,” said Adam Smith, Director of the Mayor’s Office Education and Life-Long Learning. “What better way than to do that will track and field, where it takes just a pair of shoes and you can come out and run.”

This Saturday, the Rockford FIRE will host the American Athletic Union District/State Championships at Auburn High School. More than 1,000 athletes from across Illinois will compete. Any individual or relay that finishes in the top 10 of an event is eligible for the regional meet in Bloomington in July.

Smith, who spearheaded the Rockford All-Stars track team last summer, also was instrumental in forming the FIRE, which has more than 200 registered participants this summer. The program is administered by the Rockford Park District in partnership with the YMCA, Rockford Public School District and the City of Rockford Mayor’s Office of Education and Life-Long Learning. The FIRE is sponsored by Runner’s Image, WTVO-17/WQRF-39 and Lutheran and Christian Life schools.

The Rockford FIRE is one of several track and field programs in the area, and like many of them, it is AAU and USTAF affiliated.

“Our main philanthropist, the Rockford Park District, has been phenomenal in picking up

this mantle and saying this is something new, but this is for all kids in our community and it's a great opportunity for them," Smith said.

Danny Savage, head coach of the girls for the FIRE, said track and field is a sport that any age can participate in.

"Rockford had a great history of track and field," Savage said. "It's one of the sports that you can get kids involved in whatever their athletic ability or experience has been.

"In high school, there are 18 events, and on this level there are 21, so the opportunity to compete is there. There is nobody sitting down waiting for their three minutes of playing time. Everybody gets to participate in two or three events. That gets kids involved who know they will compete every week. They know what their times are and when they do their best."

Savage is one of nine paid coaches on staff. There are two certified USATF coaches, six site coaches and 12 volunteer coaches, who are former track and field athletes or have at least one year experience coaching the sport.

"I am a die hard track guy," said Savage, who splits his coaching duties at Harlem and Hononegah.

A former summer track participant in his youth, Savage said he knows the benefits that come along with competing in the sport.

"It's great experience to meet other kids from other different high schools and different backgrounds and see what hard work can do for them," Savage said. "This program can be a huge benefit for the junior high, high school and any athlete involved in athletics because it's raising the standard of their junior high or high school team. It's preparing them for their upcoming seasons."

At Lutheran, Savage and site coach Grant Stoughton, stop practice frequently, trying to correct mistakes either in the form or the way the leg is positioned over the hurdle.

"I think we will become a successful team because of our coaches having so much experience in track and field," said Angela Woolbright, a sophomore middle distance runner at Harlem. "We have some really good talent on our team."

The group at Lutheran is referred to as the club team (Platinum) because they are considered advanced track and field athletes who will likely compete on the state, regional and national levels.

The intermediate level is referred to as Gold, while the entry level (Silver) is for those who want to be exposed to the fundamentals of track and field. Both of these levels practice at Auburn and Christian Life schools.

Each level has a different registration fee ranging from \$50-\$250 and there is a fee assistance program.

The program was exactly what Rockford Christian's **Courtney McKibben**, who placed fourth in state in the 100 hurdles, was looking for.

"I wanted to go beyond the basics and hope to do better at the state level," she said.

For both Nic Haab, a graduate of Hononegah and Huey Jackson, a freshman at Lutheran, they wanted to meet people and showcase what they can do.

"I like making friends and showing the world what I can do," Jackson said.

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