

State Champ

T'Birds' Howard Claims Division 2 Title In Pole Vault

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CALEDONIA - Craig Howard is enjoying his senior class trip to Toronto, an excursion that will take he and his Chautauqua Lake Central School classmates on visits to the CN Tower and Canada's Wonderland as well as a dinner cruise.

Chautauqua Lake's Craig Howard clears the bar in the pole vault during the New York State Public High School Athletic Association Track & Field Championships on Friday.

Photo by Brian Horey

But here's guessing his most memorable moment this weekend won't be experienced in southern Ontario.

That honor will forever be reserved for what he accomplished Friday afternoon at Caledonia-Mumford Central School, the site of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association Track & Field Championships.

Competing in the pole vault, Craig recorded a personal best of 15 feet to capture the NYSPHSAA Division 2 title and third place overall.

"I was pumped to finally get into the 15-foot range," he said. "Last year I missed going to states by three inches so it's awesome to get to states and perform pretty good there."

Shrugging off some early nerves, Craig "squeezed by" attempts at 13-6 and 14-0, but once he hit 14-6 and switched to his biggest pole, everything "just clicked."

"When I hit 14-6, it all came together," he said, noting that he cleared 15 feet on his second attempt. "Usually, I don't celebrate at all, but when I cleared 15 I hopped up pretty quick. I had to celebrate for that one."

The personal best caps quite a spring for the 17-year-old, who is the son of Bryan and Sandy Howard of Dewittville. In recent weeks he turned in a vault of 14-6 at the Super 8 meet in Salamanca and a 14-9 at the Section 6 championships at Strider Field in Jamestown.

But all the successes haven't happened by accident. In fact, Craig's performance - he missed finishing second because he had more failed attempts at 15 feet - is a testament to hard work and a special father-son bond that literally knows no bounds.

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In fact, in the last six months, Bryan Howard has made four road trips to Jonesboro, Ark., where Craig has received instruction from Earl Bell, a former world record holder and winner of the bronze medal at the 1984 Summer Olympics.

"I had vaulted at a couple different camps, but I wasn't getting as much out of it, so my dad looked up on-line to find better camps and he saw Earl Bell."

A connection was made.

The distance from the Howard residence in Dewittville and Bell's facility in Arkansas is about 900 miles.

Sixteen hours in the car? One way? For one day of instruction?

No problem.

"(My dad) sacrifices a ton for me," said Craig, who was also a member of the Thunderbirds' football, soccer, volleyball and wrestling teams. "He loves to watch all of his kids participate in sports."

His most recent visit with Bell came the weekend between the Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Athletic Association meet and the sectionals.

"We drove down there for one day, stayed and vaulted, got two new poles and drove all the way back."

The 15-foot poles were tied securely to the roof of the Howards' car.

In the end, their ultimate road trips have paid the ultimate dividends.

"It's really exciting," Chautauqua Lake coach Ed Hulton said. "At the beginning of the season I kind of thought he had the opportunity to do this. ... He put in a lot of time going to Arkansas and continued to do that through the season. Each meet, he did better and better."

Planning to study computer engineering in college, Craig is considering either Rochester Institute of Technology or the University of Buffalo where he also intends to continue his pole vaulting career.

"He's a product of a great family with tremendous family support and leadership," Hulton said. "He's a fine example of that."

NOTES: The winner of the pole vault was Jordan Yamoah of Arlington (Section 1), who cleared 16-7 for a new state record. Yamoah, second-place Nick O'Brien of Pine Bush (Section 1) and fourth-place Michael Brunoforte of St. Anthony's (Section 1) all competed in Division 1. The fifth-place finisher (No. 2 in Division 2) was Matt Allen of Olean, who cleared 14-6.

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