



MORTON

UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

July 24, 2020

Morton graduate runs into the record books ... and the next chapter of his life

When Morton High School graduate Sam Lange climbs to the stage at Saturday's commencement exercise at Morton's Carper Field to receive his diploma – a little later than normal in this upside down year – he will do so as a record setter, in more ways than one, at the very place he made his mark.



First, in May Lange broke the school's 60-year-old mark for the 1600-meter run, the most enduring on the Morton track record board, set in 1960 when it was still called "the mile." Then in June he capped this roller coaster spring on another high, winning the Peoria area's first-ever ESPY Award for outstanding athletic achievement at the high school level.

It may not have made up for the forfeiture of his final season due to COVID-19 and his pursuit of a legitimately possible state track title – he finished second in the IHSA Class 2A state cross country meet last fall – but it was some solace.

“I was definitely bummed out about not going to state,” said the 17-year-old. “So the record was like a huge bonus.”

Indeed, after his senior track season was canceled, breaking the record became “my sole purpose,” said Lange, who tailored his training to accomplish just that, with his track coach, Joe Zeller, providing the workouts.

On May 7, he achieved his goal, running the 1600 in 4 minutes, 13.8 seconds, “just me and the stopwatch.” Al Carius, a state champion for Morton who went on to a fine athletic career at the University of Illinois

400 DASH	D.J. ZAHN	2011	47.31*
800 RUN	BRIAN RITCHEY	1988	1:54.10
1600 RUN	SAMUEL LANGE	2020	4:13.83
3200 RUN	MARK OBERLE	1984	9:13.40
400 RELAY	DREW TAPHORN BRETT MILLER SETH WILKERSON BRECK SWINFORD	2012	43.55*

and ultimately to become the legendary track and cross-country coach at North Central College, had run the mile in 4 minutes, 16.8 seconds on a cinder track almost exactly 60 years earlier.

The mile is slightly longer than the 1600, but converted, Lange’s time still would have established a new record by a couple of seconds.

“The moment I knew I had it was when I came through the 1200,” said Lange. “At 3:09, I could still run 66 (for the last lap) and beat the record by one second ... I came through at 3:07. At that moment, I thought, ‘I definitely got this’ ... I gave myself enough room.”

Lange said that he had been building toward the moment, that after running a 4:17 at a time trial in April, the mark seemed “a lot more attainable.” He believes he may have had even more in the tank, but “I was already satisfied with the 4:13. It’s a really painful thing to do.”

Lange had already gotten to know Carius, having met him at the state cross-country meet last November and sharing with him his goal of breaking his record. “He was like, ‘Go for it, man. It’s been too long.’”

And so Carius was among the first he called after the fact.

“Congrats to him and a fabulous time,” said the 78-year-old Carius, still coaching at North Central. “He should be very, very proud of it. I’m shocked that the time lasted as long as it did.”



Lange is confident his record won't still be on the board in the year 2080.

“I don't know if it will be up there for too long,” he said.

“There are some kids in the junior high that are very, very talented. It was a goal of mine. I'm happy to have achieved my goal.”

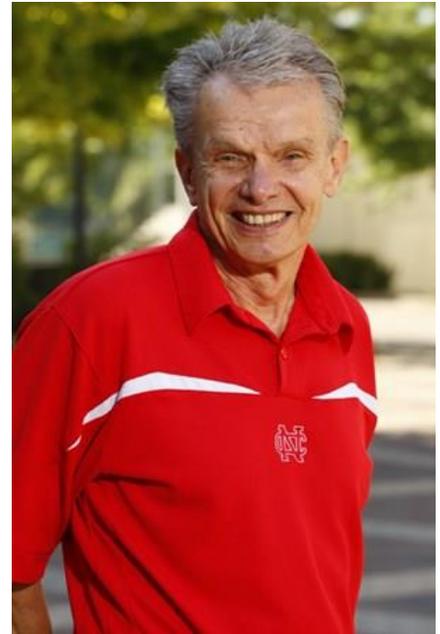
Where does it rank among his high school memories?

Lange ponders his answer: “That's an interesting question. At state and stuff it was pretty cool to go up and get a medal ... This was more of a personal goal. COVID-19 really made it something. A lot of people couldn't come and watch. This is for me. This is for the people who have been supporting me on my journey ... the small circle of people who have been there the whole time” and who were on hand to witness the record.

“I think most coaches would tell you there are two parts to being a good athlete – the ability part, which he has, and the work part,” said Zeller. “If you get both of them in one kid, it's really something special.”

In many ways, Lange did this on his own, said Zeller. Call it the loneliness of the long-distance runner.

“Being honest, he's kind of in a league of his own,” said his coach. “He's had to find it within himself to push through those workouts.”



“I was confident that he was going to do it (set the record) at some point. With that level of performance ... it really comes down to are you ready on the given day? He had the training. He was mentally prepared. I think if he would have had a season with competition, he could have gone under 4:10. He still has the capability of running a lot faster. I’m really excited about the next four years,” which Lange the aspiring engineer will spend at Michigan Technological University.

It's not just that Lange is a superior athlete, as attested to by the inaugural Central Illinois ESPY Award he took home last month after being singled out among a final field that included accomplished athletes in swimming, soccer, track, cross-country, basketball, wrestling, volleyball and softball from Peoria, Metamora, Lewiston and East Peoria.



“He’s a wonderful leader and one of the most positive young men I’ve coached,” said Morton Cross-Country Coach Joel Zehr. “A lot of the younger kids look up to him ... Just how hard he worked to get where he is, to hone his craft as a runner ... He provided

leadership for the other boys by example.”

Neither Zeller nor Zehr would predict a ceiling for Lange.

“I don’t think he’s anywhere near what he can accomplish,” especially with collegiate competition pushing him, said Zeller.

“Just the joy he exudes. He doesn’t let anything get him down for too long,” added Zehr. “You never can tell. Al Carius never thought it would be a 60-year record, either.”

In any case, Lange has set another goal for himself. “I want to break 4 minutes” in the mile, he said. “I think that would be cool.”

His former coaches would love to be there when that happens.

In the meantime, studying mechanical engineering will be every bit as important to Lange as continuing his running career at Michigan Tech, up in that state’s cold Upper Peninsula (“across Lake Superior and I’m in Canada”).

“I’m going to school for school,” said Lange, who likely could have had his pick of many Division 1 programs. “I don’t want running to be a job ... I just want to go to college and have a good experience.”

As he did at Morton High School, where he will cap his career – and his head – with a mortar board on Saturday.

If Lange could say one thing more to his classmates, it would be this: “Dreams are achieved through hard work, dedication and perseverance. You have to give it your all and not be afraid to make mistakes, but learn from them.”

Good luck to the Class of 2020.

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