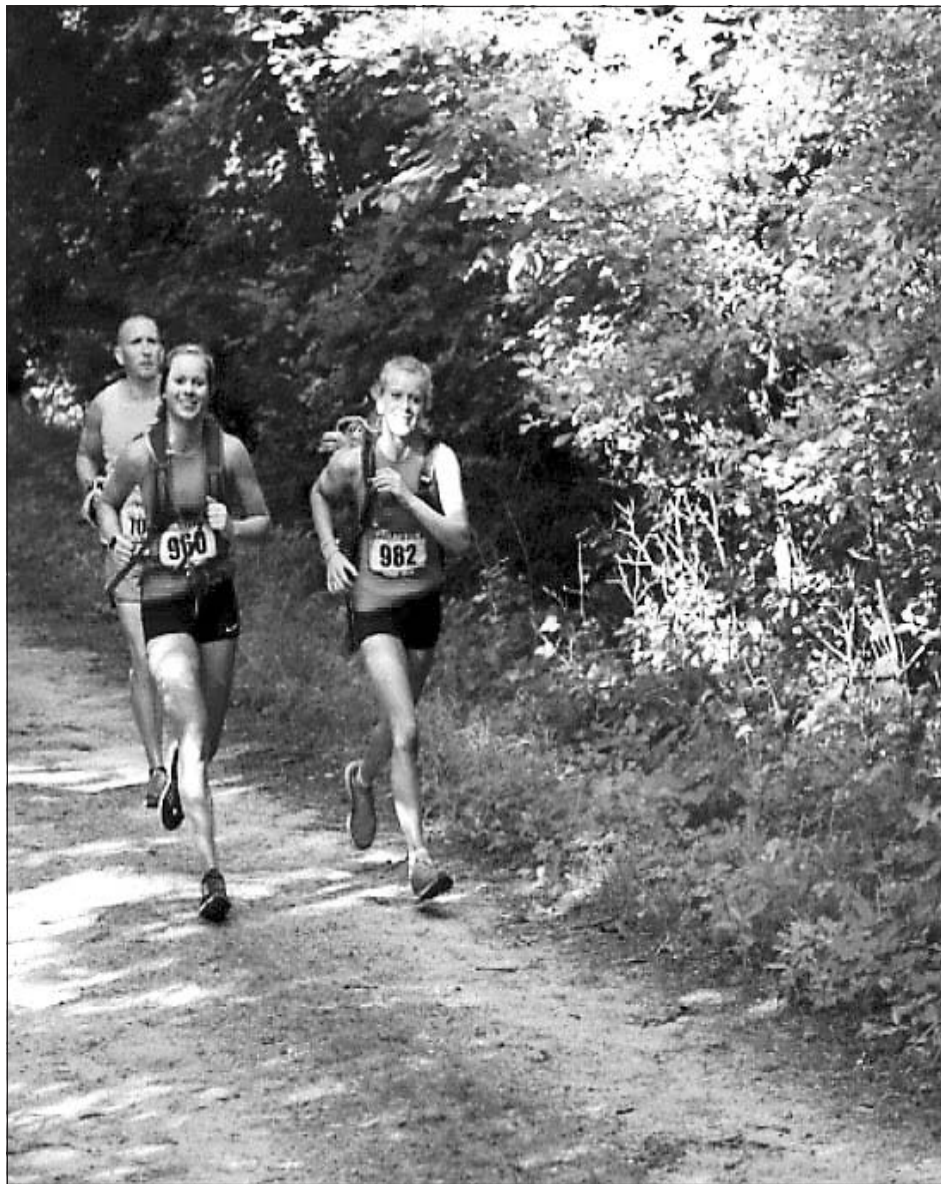


Last chance to run



Submitted photos

McKenna Andrews and Forest Lake cross-country teammate Amelea Hauer run in an endurance race in the summer.

Volleyball switch to spring allows Andrews to join CC team

John Wagner
Sports Editor

McKenna Andrews was at work the day the texts started flooding her phone.

The date was Aug. 4, and the MSHSL had just decided to push the start of the volleyball season to March. Andrews, who serves as the libero for the Forest Lake volleyball team, saw a number of texts from teammates who were disappointed by the move.

But one other text caught her eye.

“At first I was kind of bummed when I heard, because I realized I would have to decide where I’m going to college before

I play my senior volleyball season,” she said. “Then I got a text from [girls cross-country coach] John [Fick], and he said: ‘You ready for cross-country? Volleyball starts March 15.’”

“And I thought to myself, ‘This could be a good experience.’”

So Andrews began to think about competing in a new fall sport, temporarily giving up the bumps and spikes of volleyball to travel the trails of cross-country. Fick said the move is not as far-fetched as it may seem.

“McKenna is a very good volleyball player, and I knew that before I texted her,” he said. “But I have coached McKenna in track, and I know she’s a very good distance run-

ner. We’ve been trying to figure out a way to make it work for her to pursue both sports at the same time. ...

“I knew she was interested, and I knew she had been running. So when I heard volleyball was moving, I thought: ‘This is going to work. Let’s go.’”

So Andrews is running with Forest Lake’s girls cross-country team this fall.

Making a choice

In this era of sports specialists, Andrews is an exception.

“I tried to stick with as many sports as I could for as long as I could,” she said. “Choosing was hard for me. For example, it was hard to give up basketball, but [Junior Olympic] volleyball was at the same time as basketball, and I love volleyball.”

“Distance running can feel like stabbing yourself in the head with a pencil for 18 to 30 minutes. It’s great to have someone [like McKenna Andrews] who’s motivated to enjoy that kind of thing.”

– John Fick, Forest Lake girls cross-country coach

so fun to be around. Volleyball is super-fast paced, and there are a lot of different skills involved, so you can work to get better. I loved the challenge.”

One of the biggest challenges Andrews faced early in her career was one of the craziest: Which hand should she use to strike the ball?

“I’m right handed, so when I started playing I

used my right hand – and I was awful,” she said. “I almost went back to basketball, because I thought I wasn’t good enough to play volleyball.

“Then one day I was playing pingpong in our basement, and I was playing left-handed because I was better that way. My dad suggested I play volleyball left-handed, and I was better. So I’ve been left-handed ever since.”

Soon after Andrews focused on volleyball, she also focused on becoming a libero. The libero is a back-row specialist who spends her time on the floor chasing down the other team’s spikes, keeping the play alive by passing the ball to her team’s setter to start the offense.

“The biggest reason [I play libero] is because I stopped growing in fifth grade, and I’m only 5-5,” Andrews said with a laugh. “But I always have been quick on my feet, and I’ve always been a good passer. And I’m competitive. It’s a lot of fun. The feeling of someone trying to get a kill, and instead you keep it off the ground and pass it right to the setter’s hands, is an amazing feeling.”

Playing the libero position is not a glorious position, because a libero is not allowed to swing for kills. But Andrews joined the Rangers varsity last fall and saw significant action at that position.

“We try to give our liberos a lot of glory, because nothing else matters if you don’t have a good pass,” Forest Lake volleyball coach Sherri Alm said. “McKenna can swing, because she’s a good jumper and a good athlete. But our needs as a team are at libero, so that’s why she has specialized.”

And her willingness to put the needs of the team before her desires makes her an important component of Forest Lake’s volleyball team.

“She’s always dialed in, focused and hungry,” Alm said. “She’s a critical component of our success.”

Going the distance

Andrews still remembers the first time she experienced cross-country. And it is far from a positive memory.

“We were running laps around the pond in eighth grade, and all I could think was, ‘Why am I here?’” she said. “But I stuck with it, and I kept meeting new girls, and I kept getting better.”

That is one of the reasons why Andrews began her track career as a sprinter, focused on the 100 and 200 meters in seventh grade and not covering any “distance” greater than 400 meters in eighth grade.

“Whenever we ran any distance, I was a big ‘side stitch’ girl,” Andrews said, noting that she would feel a sharp pain just below her ribs. “I couldn’t figure out how to breathe properly. I would spend runs literally counting my breaths.”

Throughout that time, Fick would ask Andrews to join the distance runners in their training. As a freshman, Andrews finally relented. She began practicing with the distance runners, and that spring she focused more on the 800 meters.

Fick saw something in Andrews, so he pushed her during track season.

“There was a girl on the team who was two years older than me whose name is Regan Duffy,” Andrews said. “Coach Fick would always make me and my friend, Amelea Hauer, run with her. Regan was really fast, but she talked about how she wasn’t that fast at first. She had to work at it, and I realized he wanted us

to put in that work to get better.”

And Andrews continued to get better. So much better that she now can answer that question that dogged her during those agonizing laps around the pond during seventh grade.

“I realize now that you have to stick with things, even when they’re tough or challenging at first,” she said.

Taking one last chance

Before her sophomore year at Forest Lake, Andrews decided to try to “double up” and compete in both cross-country and volleyball in the fall.

Unfortunately, the experiment did not last.

“I made the JV volleyball team, and it was more time-consuming than I thought it would be,” Andrews said. “My class load became a little more intense that year as well. I also didn’t want to be the one who missed something fun after volleyball practice because I had to run, or the other way around. I did try [to do both], but once school started, I just realized it was too much.”

She considered attempting the volleyball/cross-country double again as a junior, but she made the varsity volleyball team and decided to again focus on her favorite sport.

Now, with volleyball’s move to March, Fick is excited to have Andrews join his squad.

“She’s a senior, and she has a great attitude,” Fick said. “She works very hard, and I’ve always admired that about her. I love to have her around because cross-country is a hard sport; distance running can feel like stabbing yourself in the head with a pencil for 18 to 30 minutes. It’s great to

have someone who’s motivated to enjoy that kind of thing.”

Fick hopes her willingness to work will help elevate the effort of her new cross-country teammates.

“McKenna is so willing to work hard to be the best she can be,” he said. “And she isn’t shy about motivating others to be the best they can be. She just has that personality where she’s going to bust her butt and work hard, and I like to have other runners see that.”

Andrews knows her senior cross-country season will not be “normal,” since the Rangers are limited to competitions between other Suburban East Conference schools and there is no guarantee of a section or state tournament.

And that does not matter to her.

“You have to love the people you’re running with, or it’s really not worth it,” Andrews said. “So we may not get as many races, but what makes track and cross-country fun for me is the practices. I look forward to going to practice every day, getting to bond with my team.”

That is why she is thankful for the opportunity to compete in cross-country this fall and also thankful to everyone who has made it possible.

“I definitely thank my teammates in both sports – my cross-country teammates are super enthusiastic and supportive, and my volleyball teammates are as well,” Andrews said. “I want to thank all of my coaches, and I thank my parents, Dean and Kelly Andrews, because whenever I need something, they’re always there for me.”



McKenna Andrews enters her second season as the starting libero for the Forest Lake volleyball team. Andrews plans to play volleyball in college starting next fall.