

THE GOLDEN TOUCH: Edwardsville's A.J. Epenesa has that approach in athletics and approach to life

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It seems everything Edwardsville's A.J. Epenesa touches in athletics turns to gold.

The varsity football and basketball star has now turned his attention to track. He has set the weight events on fire, winning several big invitational meets in the discus and placing high in the shot put. He also puts his schoolwork at the top of his priority list each week.

Recently he cracked an Edwardsville High School discus record by Bob Hoskins, set in 1964. Epenesa threw the discus 187-2.5 on April 14th at the Alton Freshman-Sophomore Relays, which is one of the best high school throws in the country. Hoskins' mark was 178-11.

Edwardsville track coach Chad Lakatos said, "Considering Epenesa, a sophomore, had limited experience throwing the discus until recently, it is a story within itself."

"It is just a matter of reps for him and being able to throw the discus between the lines," Coach (Matt) Martin will work with him. I think we will be watching A.J. on Sundays at some point in the NFL in about eight years."

Lakatos said anyone who can excel in football, basketball and now track like Epenesa is obviously very talented, but he said the most important thing is he is a good kid.

"He is very humble," Lakatos said. "He has a great family and it will be neat to see him blossom and how much he improves over the next couple years. Who knows what he will do in years to come."

In a one-on-one conversation sitting on the grass near the discus area at a recent track meet, Epenesa demonstrated everything Lakatos described: humility and genuineness.

A.J. is asked this question frequently, he says, about what sport is his favorite, and it doesn't take him long to answer.

"Football is my favorite sport," he said. "I love playing football."

A.J. constantly sets new goals for himself depending on the sport and now he is focusing his attention on track. Meanwhile, nearly each day, another major college football scout or coach is contacting him about attending their school.

Now, everywhere Epenesa walks at a track meet, eyes follow, especially in the discus arena. Asked how he handles the attention, he answers simply: he tries to keep level and everything in perspective. He does not try to let all the attention go to his head and his father, Epenesa "Eppy" Epenesa, yes, that is his name, and his football/specialty weights coach in track Matt Martin, work to keep him focused. Eppy was a member of the Iowa

Hawkees team from 1995 to 1997. He transferred to Iowa after being a star at Iowa Wesleyan the previous two years. Eppy is originally from Pago Pago (American Samoa).

A.J. had nothing but praise for his father, and Edwardsville Community Unit School District 7, starting with Superintendent Dr. Ed Hightower on down to Martin and Chad Lakatos, his track coaches, and his varsity basketball coach Mike Waldo.



“I feel when it comes to this attention I am getting, it is a blessing having my father and Coach Martin to downsize it all,” A.J. said. “I am still young. I don’t really think about it and the offers. I don’t bring it up unless someone else brings it up. I keep low-key and mind my life. I try to be grounded and humble.”

A.J. again emphasized how important Coach Martin is in his life.

“He is the head coach of the football team and position coach and he is a really big part of my life and sports life and everything I do. I am with him all the time in the fall and in spring, almost 24-7. He is like a father figure for all his players and athletes. He is there to support us and not sugar coat anything and tells us what need to be done.”

The EHS athletic star also praised Coach Waldo, saying, “he is one of the greatest people I know.”

“I needed Icy Hot for muscle pains last year and he bought five bottles to carry with us through the season,” A.J. said. “He is the most generous and loving coach for his athletes. I wouldn’t want to play high school sports anywhere else but Edwardsville.”

He said he doesn’t know a public school in this part of the state that works any harder than the coaches.

“Some of the coaches sleep in the locker room getting film ready during football season,” he said. “Coach Waldo watches film all the time and has 30 plays for the scout team to learn each week.”

While at home, A.J. tries to be a good example for his young brothers, 13, and 8. Both are playing sports. One is a football player, wrestler and is on the track team, the other is a baseball and soccer player.

During the off-season, A.J. lifts and trains with his father. A.J.’s father was a defensive end at Iowa University. Iowa has already been knocking on A.J.’s door to play football along with about every other major college football program in America.

A.J.’s father married his mother when he transferred his college football career to Iowa . Stephanie, his mother, and her family are originally from the Edwardsville area. She was then Stephanie Cope and graduated from Edwardsville High School.

A.J. definitely hasn’t made a decision yet on where he is going to school to play football.

“Right now I am trying to keep my options open and focus on academics and get the best grades I can get and do the best I can in my different sports.”

