

# Future looks nothing but bright for A.J. Epenesa in track and field, all sports

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Edwardsville's A.J. Epenesa is spending much of his summer weightlifting, running and making the transition from track and field to football. He also probably is smiling inside after earning two IHSA Class 3A state track and field medals and helping his team to a state championship.

Epenesa, 6-5, 245 pounds, just finished his sophomore year at Edwardsville High School. He came back from the IHSA Class 3A state track and field meet with a second place in the discus and ninth place in the shot put. Epenesa's points were difference-makers in Edwardsville's first boys state title in track and field.

"A.J. Epenesa is a special athlete," said his head track and field coach Chad Lakatos. "Guys like him are a coach's dream and don't come around very often. Not only does he have the athleticism part, but he is special because of the type of person he is.

"A.J. is a good kid. He has good character and makes good decisions. He also has a good family and is a good athlete. He is the total package. He needs to keep working hard and things will fall right into place for A.J."

Epenesa was as proud of his ninth-place finish in the shot put as he was the second place in the discus at state because it allowed him to be "all-state" in both events and assist his team with points in both.

Epenesa's toss of 53-09.25 in the shot put at state was his personal best.

With Epenesa's success in track and field, chatter has started on what kind of college thrower in the discus he could be. He said his first love is football, though.

"I will take things a step at a time and it will just depend on what we decide," Epenesa said of his future after high school with track.

The Edwardsville High School defensive end is being pursued by nearly every Division I football team in the country to play football after high school.

He said if anyone had to beat him at state he was glad it was Ricky Nelson of Belleville West, a Southwestern Conference athlete and friend. Nelson won the state meet with a toss of 192-03; Epenesa threw 180-10 in the prelims at state and his last throw was 191-07, only 8 inches shy of Nelson's best mark.

Epenesa and Nelson tangled at the Collinsville Invitational when he threw 194-03 and Nelson failed to get a toss in on the day. Epenesa's toss that day shattered the Edwardsville school record again in the discus.

"I am glad I was able to contribute eight points," he said of his state discus performance.

The team championship meant more to Epenesa than anything and it was evident as he proudly carried the championship trophy to the Edwardsville High School track after the team arrived back in town.

Lakatos was watching closely when Epenesa let his longest throw rip through the air on his last attempt.

"He knew it was a big throw," Lakatos said. "Everybody around knew. I also saw his reaction when he fell short. If his angle or release was slightly different or he had a different release he could have won. Hats off to Nelson for his last throw to win state. A. J. is just a competitor.

"This probably left him fueling the fire next season. He is just is a competitor and he showed what kind of kid he is with the way he handled getting second."

Lakatos said it is no surprise to him that Epenesa is so successful in three varsity sports.



“Great athletes are able to play multiple sports,” Lakatos said. “I think one day on Sundays in the NFL you will see A.J. playing. He was seventh in the nation in the high school discus as only a sophomore this year.”

Lakatos had a description to categorize A.J. Epenesa that would probably also stand for what his football coach Matt Martin and his basketball coach Mike Waldo: would say: “A.J. is a once in a lifetime athlete.”







