

Lexi Penney, Brookfield East

Spartans got their Penney's worth

East's three-sport star earned 11 varsity letters, a seven-time state qualifier

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BROOKFIELD — Lexi Penney has some poking and prodding peers to thank for what turned out to be an outstanding high school athletic career.

Leading up to the start of her freshman year at Brookfield East, Penney was competing in JV tennis and had yet to commit to gymnastics. As it turns out, she'd become a state champion in the latter just months later and go from playing tennis to earning a diving scholarship, not to mention a state-qualifying pole vaulter.

Penney was an 11-time varsity letterwinner and seven-time state qualifier in all, and although her senior athletic calendar was cut short, the University of Denver commit is The Freeman's 2019-20 Female Athlete of the Year.

"She's just a natural athlete," Brookfield East diving coach Carol Rose said. "She's incredibly talented. She has great spatial awareness obviously that really helps with all three — pole vault, gymnastics and diving."

Penney was set on ending her high school career with a bang after finishing 17th at state in pole vault last spring, but instead saw the track and field season end before it even began. Selfishly, she's glad it was track instead of diving, and she said it has been a different but good experience.

"This is the first time since probably I was really little I haven't been in sports," Penney said. "Keeping active has

been kind of a challenge. I've done FaceTime and Zoom calls with teammates and done some workouts virtually together."

Before Penney was even in grade school she was participating in gymnastics. But she was seemingly done with the sport at the age of 14 based on her experience in club.

"They didn't really want girls going into their high school team," Penney said. "They want you to stick with club, so I wasn't planning on competing in high school."

During a track and field camp the summer before her freshman year at East, that changed.

"A couple of girls that were helping out with it were on the (gymnastics) team," Penney said. "They talked to me the whole week and bugged me about it, so I ended up going to do it."

By the end of her freshman season, she was in Wisconsin Rapids. Not only that, but winning a state championship in the balance beam and finishing eighth in all-around for the Brookfield co-op.

"She ended up coming out and loving the team atmosphere of high school," Brookfield gymnastics and Brookfield East girls track coach Erin Kotka said. "She worked really hard. Gymnastics is a tough sport to get back into. She was at a higher level when she quit club, but she's driven and worked really hard. She didn't even peak until the end of the season and she ended up being a state champ."

For Penney, it was a com-



Dave Radcliffe/Freeman Staff

Brookfield East's Lexi Penney was picked as The Freeman's 2019-20 Female Athlete of the Year. She was an 11-time varsity letterwinner and a seven-time state qualifier in diving, gymnastics and was a pole vaulter on the track and field team.

plete surprise.

"I just had no idea really what it meant," Penney said. "Coming from a club sport where state isn't a huge deal to high school where state is, looking back it was way cooler than I realized at the time."

Penney showed off her versatility throughout her high school gymnastics career. She'd medal in beam, vault and all-around as a sophomore, posted the fourth-best beam score as a junior and then took fifth in uneven bars this past winter at Wisconsin Rapids Lincoln Field House.

"It showed she's just a really good all-around gymnast," Kotka said. "It's not like there's one event she just picks and chooses. I think it's cool even though she's not doing gymnastics in college, since she's diving it's almost like she's continued her athletic success because of gymnastics because it transitions into diving really well, and also her events with track and field."

Speaking of diving, that wasn't even on Penney's radar as a freshman.

Why?

"Because my mom dove in

high school," Penney said. "I said I'm not going to be like her and do the same thing, so I played tennis my freshman year."

That's a decision Rose playfully gave her grief about over the next three years. This time, it was a gymnastics teammate who convinced Penney to give diving a try.

"She had done the high school program at Schroeder Aquatic Center," Rose said. "She actually came here having only done that in the summer. She had most of her dives when she came in which is really not normal.

One dive in particular (they probably had her doing a little too early, but she's that good. She learns new dives and picks up new skills very, very quickly. She wants to learn harder things."

Penney narrowly missed out on qualifying for state despite scoring a 380 in her first year of competitive diving. But she took the next step as a junior, making it to the UW Natatorium and seizing the opportunity by finishing sixth in the 1-meter competition.

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Penney

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Penney essentially duplicated that performance as a senior last fall — her score was actually .05 worse than her junior year — but made the podium once again, moving up to finish fourth.

“She did have some issues with a foot on and off, so I think we would have done a couple other things that we didn’t get to,” Rose said. “But she was doing some pretty hard dives. She’s very focused. She asks a lot of questions. She wants to improve all the time.”

Penney said she has the accessory navicular bone in both of her ankles in addition to having “super flat feet,” which could also be related to gymnastics. But in her words, it’s never been that big of a deal, and it didn’t prevent her from doing plenty of 3-meter diving at Schroeder, which should prep her well for the next level.

The process of signing her letter of intent at Denver, which she made official on Feb. 5, played out right before the calendar turned to 2020 — and also forced her to miss a certain state championship game in November.

“I think honestly it was my recruiting trip that really got me,” Penney said. “I just remember thinking it kind of funny. It was the same weekend as the Brookfield East football state championship game so I was annoyed I couldn’t go to that. I was like, if this school isn’t amazing I’m going to be so mad.”

It was amazing, as it turns out. Penney noted she loved the team atmosphere compared to other college visits she made.

“And it was the last school I visited, so it really stuck with me,” Penney said. “The coaches and staff were all alums of the U, which said a lot to me.”

With a college choice made, Penney was still planning to compete in track and field this spring, but would not get a chance to see if she could build off last year’s



Submitted photo

Brookfield East senior Lexi Penney was a four-time state qualifier in gymnastics and won the balance beam state title her freshman year.

performance.

“It’s hard not to see her compete this year in track,” Kotka said. “After her season she broke the school record in the summer, so she was destined for a big thing this year. It’s something we’ve missed out on, but there are plenty of other things that she’s done.”

And the accomplishments continued to roll in for Penney even during the pandemic. She was named a WIAA Female Scholar Athlete and also the Female Spartan Athlete Award winner.

“In addition to everything else she’s got a really big load of classes, she’s a great singer, she has her own a cappella group. She does it all,” Rose said. “My only concern is she might be up too late doing homework and not getting a lot of sleep.”

Penney, who also plays the piano, plans to get into the medical field, although she also has interests in astronomy. Whatever she continues on to do in Denver, the calm, reserved adrenaline junky is poised to have great

success.

“She’s just a great kid,” Rose said. “I really enjoyed coaching her. I’m going to miss her. She was the perfect role model for our other kids, and I could always count on her.”

SUDOKU

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Here’s How It Works:

Sudoku puzzles are formatted a 3x3 boxes. To solve a sudoku, 1 row, column and box. Each num column and box. You can figure appear by using the numeric cl more numbers you name, the e.

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5	7	9	2
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