

Julia Scrudato and Emma Zawatski Demonstrate Sportsmanship at Meet of Champions

July 5, 2023

Few events on the NJSIAA sports calendar are as unique as the Outdoor Track and Field Meet of Champions.

The MOC brings together the best of the best, many who've competed against each other throughout the year and their careers. But they aren't just competing against each other -they are also racing against the clock, and for a chance to surpass times recorded by some very famous names from the past.

Another thing also makes the MOC special are the bonds and friendships that have been established among many of the competitors. Part of is the long-standing tradition of respect that exists among track and field competitors. But another component is the character within the athletes themselves.

That aspect was on display in one particular event when the MOC was contested on June 15 at Franklin High School.

The girls' 1,600 meter final had a loaded field that was highlighted by Emma Zawatski, a junior from Freehold Township, whose list of achievements is a long one.

Among her accomplishments were the 2022 outdoor MOC championship in the 1,600, and the 2022 Group 4 cross country championship, followed by the cross country MOC championship (she was named New Jersey's Gatorade Cross Country Athlete of the Year.

During this year's indoor season, Emma set a state junior class mile record (4:48.71), won the Group 4 championship in the 800 and 1,600, and the MOC in the 1,600.

One of Emma's main rivals in the 1,600 is another junior, Julia Scrudato of Montgomery. While Emma had captured all the major 1,600 championships this winter and spring, Julia placed second to her at the

indoor Group 4 and MOC, and outdoor sectional and Group 4 meets.

The MOC represented a chance for Emma to cap a magnificent NJSIAA year spanning the three seasons. But on that day, something unexpected happened - Julia, who ran the greatest race of her life, was the winner.

Scrudato's personal best time of 4:45.76 not only beat second-place Zawatski (4:48.13) for the first time this year, it was the third-fastest time in meet history, and the best in the past 10 years. Her previous PR was 4:52.96, making the victory a tremendous personal achievement.



Julia Scrudato passes Emma Zawatski to win the 1,600 meters at the NJSIAA Meet of Champions

Photo credit: Andrew Mills/NJ Advance Media

Julia was stunned and elated by her victory. But in a great display of sportsmanship, no one in the moment was happier for her than Emma, who offered her immediate congratulations that included a heartfelt embrace. It is something worthy of a salute as part of the NJSIAA Sportsmanship Series, presented by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy.

“I’ve been racing her for a long time, and I feel like distance runners are always nice,” Julia said. “New Jersey is such a small state, and we’re always competing with each other and pushing each other to run faster times. I think it’s really great when other athletes congratulate you after a race. Everyone is in it together. It means a lot. She’s someone I look up to, so it felt great.”

As a competitor, Emma had every reason that day to react with disappointment. But as a person, she was overjoyed for a rival who over the past couple of years has become a friend through their races against each other.

“Julia and I have gotten very close over these last three years competing against each other,” Emma said. “Runners see each other at our worsts, so there is no way to be ‘fake’ with each other. Julia is such a gracious person and is always up for a nice battle in a race. I know how hard she works, and how happy she is for me in big moments, so I was happy to share the joy with her. Obviously I wanted to win, but if anyone were to beat me, I’m very glad it was her because she is an amazing runner who deserves the spotlight.”

In Julia’s MOC victory, she ran a 70.15 final 400 meters to pass Emma and score the major upset.

“We always push each other to do our best,” Emma said. “Because we know every time we toe the line together, we have an amazing competitor in the race. When I am preparing for a race with her, I know that no matter the outcome, and without fail, there will be a hug at the finish line.”

While graciousness shown that day by Emma is consistent with the mutual respect often shown by runners, it’s also part of her every-day personality.

“What separates Emma from any other runner I have coached in 17 years is that she truly loves it,” said Freehold Township coach Todd Briggs. “It is not an act. She loves the sport, she is a historian of the sport. She gets recognized at meets more for her quirky TikTok videos than her actual running. She’s had famous athletes comment on her TikTok’s. It’s not an act when you see her in interviews or how she hugs and smiles at teammates and competitors.



Julia Scudato after her 1,600 meter victory at the Meet of Champions

“She can get beat by someone and on the cool down run, she will go on and on about what great friends she is with that runner. It is fascinating to me. And it’s not that she isn’t competitive. She’s as competitive as anyone and comes from a competitive family. It’s just that she doesn’t let the competitiveness ruin her fun and her joy. She says we are like oil and water. I am always stressing the potential downside of a situation and she just laughs at me. So, the sportsmanship she displays comes natural to her. Because she just seems to love being out there, loves the running. It’s that simple. I think those around her, including myself, complicate it.”

According to Briggs, that was very evident in the that recent MOC race.

“That race was just about the running,” he said. “She wanted to win. Oh, she wanted to win. But losing isn’t going to steal her joy. Just how she’s built and it’s her biggest advantage and I always tell her that before big races when the intensity is high. She loves it and is doing it for all the right/positive reasons.”

Being such competitive and successful runners, even at what’s still a young age, has also made both athletes very in tune with the concept of sportsmanship.

“Everyone is in it together,” Julia said. “Everyone is pretty much dying out there and works their hardest. You know how much work everyone has put into the sport and all of the hours involved in it. It’s great that

everyone is running a race around one track, and has a respect for each other.”

“Sportsmanship is what makes sports fun,” Emma said. “The actual running part isn’t necessarily what I love most about track, although I do love running. It’s the people that you surround yourself with. I look forward to national and instate meets because I know that I am going to have a friend there that I don’t get to see often. Track friends are the best friends.”