



Charlotte Weekly's Indoor Track & Field Super Team

Early setbacks didn't discourage Hopewell star

by C. Jemal Horton
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The early days were not exactly filled with highlight reels and other moments to let you know a track prodigy was in the making.

Oh, sure, Alphonso Jordan was *built* like a track and field athlete. But despite being tall and sinewy, his first forays into events such as the triple jump gave no indication of what he one day would become.

"When he first got here in ninth grade, he jumped 34 (feet)," Hopewell High School track coach Lawrence Lawson said of Jordan. "It was like, 'What?' With his tools, I felt he could do much better than that. Now, through hard work, look where he is."

Simply put, Jordan is one of the best junior triple-jumpers in the United States, and he is fast making his way to elite status in other events.

Last month, the Hopewell senior proved he was the state's best in the indoor triple jump, winning the event with an effort of 46 feet, 3.5 inches at the University of North Carolina. Jordan also finished fourth in the long jump, with a leap of 22-10.

Last week, he proved his worth against the nation's best, winning the triple jump at the Nike Indoor Nationals in Landover, Md., with a personal record of 49-1.

Jordan leads this year's Charlotte Weekly Boys' Track and Field

Super Team as Athlete of the Year.

Clearly, he isn't the same athlete he was four years ago, when he struggled to reach the low 30s in the triple jump.

"I was decent when I started, but I was nowhere near the athlete I am today," Jordan said, with a shrug. "The triple jump was not exactly my best event.

With the help of coach Lawson and my AAU coach, Trenton Guy
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Harding girls' star driven by mother's love

by C. Jemal Horton
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Nyosha Bryant jumps with a purpose. And, no, the Harding University High School freshman doesn't merely focus on winning another gold medal each time she heads down the runway and takes off for the long-jump pit.

Bryant's inspiration to succeed is much more important – something that makes her squeeze in one more lap of practice when she's tired, something she sees and touches almost every day of her life.

Her mother, Crystal Collier.

"I try hard at everything I do for her," Bryant said of her mother. "I'm never slack. I try to come out here and give it my all each day. It comes from my mom. She's always been an inspiration to me. She's stayed on me about not slacking off when I do something. She's always there for me, which says something since she's a single parent. She works hard to try to provide for me and my brother and my sister. She does whatever she can. I have to work extra hard. I want to be able to help my mom when she gets older."

That determination has helped turn Bryant into one of the top girls' track athletes in the city. Last month, she was the only Mecklenburg County girl to win a state championship at the indoor championships at the University of North Carolina. Although she wasn't expected to win the event, largely because it was dominated by upperclassmen during the regular season, Bryant jumped 18 feet, 4 inches to bring home the gold.

Bryant is the Charlotte Weekly Girls' Track and Field Athlete of the Year.

"It was so nerve-wracking," the 15-year-old Bryant said of winning the state championship. "I was a little nervous being a freshman jumping against older girls. I hadn't trained that much for the long jump, either. I just tried my best. I guess I did what wasn't expected."

Bryant's mother was the first to notice that her oldest child had the potential to be a successful track athlete. When Bryant was 5 years old, her mother signed her on with the Charlotte Flight

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Ron Deshaies/CW photo

Hopewell High School's Alphonso Jordan and Harding University High School's Nyosha Bryant were the only two Mecklenburg County athletes to win individual state titles at the indoor championships last month. For the complete Charlotte Weekly Track & Field Super Team, see page 41.



Seriously Speaking ...

I know what the Panthers did last summer: mess up

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All the pomp and circumstance surrounding last week's ACC tournament and this week's start of the NCAA tournament might mask the colossal mistake that's taken place at Bank of America Stadium for a while.

Hey, that's understandable; this is college basketball country, and two of the state's favorite teams – Duke and North

Carolina – should have an auspicious opening weekend.

Pretty soon, though, whether it's when the first minicamp begins in May or at some point when the Carolina Panthers are fighting for an NFC South title next autumn, it will become painfully apparent: Charlotte's football team messed up

royally by letting linebacker Will Witherspoon leave town early this week.

Witherspoon signed a six-year, \$33 million contract with the St. Louis Rams on Sunday, March 12, with \$15 million guaranteed. You can't blame Witherspoon for taking the better deal with an NFC rival, no matter how much the Panthers expressed they wanted to keep him in Charlotte; football is a brutal sport that doesn't guarantee its players their full contracts.

The Panthers are the ones who made the drastic mistake.

Last summer, instead of securing the future of then-free-agent-to-be Witherspoon,

who has been the team's most dependable player not named Mike Minter in recent seasons, Carolina elected to sign then-free-agent-to-be linebacker Dan Morgan to a five-year contract extension worth \$28 million.

It's a decision that will haunt the franchise for the next few seasons.

Witherspoon's departure leaves Morgan as the only returning starter in the Carolina linebacker corps. And, well, everyone, including the Panthers, knows about Morgan's propensity for getting injured. The man could pull a hamstring lying on the couch watching *film* of an

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Hopewell's Jordan

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(Sr.), I started lifting weights, doing push-ups and sit-ups. As the years progressed, I got stronger and more conscious of what I was doing. I got more focused. That's what made me the jumper I am today."

At 6-feet-3, Jordan still is tall and sinewy. However, because of the weightlifting, he has more power. And because of the time he spends working with Lawson and the coach's son, Denzell, Jordan has better technique and a more competitive spirit.

Jordan's willingness to compete in the 55-meter hurdles during the indoor season helped Hopewell finish seventh in the state meet, which was the highest finish for a Charlotte boys' team.

"Alphonso works hard," Lawrence Lawson said. "He comes out with me and my son on weekends. He and Denzell push each other. If Denzell is going 44 (feet), Alphonso's got to go 48. He just gives everything. Running back from long jump to triple jump to hurdles, that's a

tough task. They all go on at the same time."

Jordan inherited some pretty good athletic ability. Years ago, his mother, Regina, was a track star at Garinger High School. His father, who also is named Alphonso, was a strong high school athlete in several sports. Even Jordan's little brother, Daniel, though just a 10th-grader, is a promising basketball and football player.

And then there's Jordan's intelligence.

Jordan boasts a 4.5 grade point average and plans to study architecture in college. He will choose between North Carolina and Georgia Tech in a week or so, he says, and he always uses a cerebral approach to competing.

"It's a mind thing," he said. "People don't realize how much the mental aspect comes into it. If you think you can't do it, you won't do it. You've got to throw out the word 'can't.' Once you put your mind to it, you can do it. I've always had to have that approach.

"Otherwise, there's no telling where I would be." □

Harding's Bryant

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junior track team. Bryant showed instant potential.

"I just used to be out there running for the fun of it," said Bryant, whose father, Thomas Gordon, was a high school track star. "When I first started, I focused on running. Long jump came later on, when I got a little taller. But I was encouraged.

"My mom and other people used to tell me, 'Oh, you're good at track! You're going to be something in life.' So I just tried to stick with it so I won't get into trouble or anything. I don't want to be in all the other mess that other kids out there get into. I want to be different."

Harding track coach Rudolph Brown said Bryant is on her way. Bryant's talent, coupled with her relentless work ethic,

might make her a star one day, he said.

"She listens. She's very coachable and enthusiastic," said Brown, who is the Charlotte Weekly's Track and Field Coach of the Year. "Although we are pretty blessed to have some great athletes here at Harding, she complements the program so well. It's very rare that you find someone at that level who is as disciplined and focused as she is.

"She has the potential to go as far as she wants to go in the sport. To be this young and talented as she is, and also have the work ethic that she has, you're going to hear a lot about her in high school. She'll go on to the next level, and you may see her even farther than that. The sky's the limit, as far as the ability she has."

And one way or another, she'll take her mother with her on the journey. □

Speaking

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NFL game. Even worse, he has a history of concussions, something that's ended too many careers way too soon.

Since arriving in the league in 2001, Morgan has yet to play a full 16-game season. Of the 80 Carolina regular-season games that have taken place since his arrival, Morgan has missed 25 – nearly a third of the games. That the Panthers would allow Witherspoon to leave with Morgan as their only returning starter at linebacker is one of the more befuddling moves in franchise history.

Morgan is a fine linebacker who has one Pro Bowl appearance to Withers-

poon's zero. But on good teams – Super Bowl-caliber teams – it's not always about the Pro Bowl types; it's about the role players and the players who have high thresholds for pain and the players coaches can rely on to be in the lineup each week.

Witherspoon possesses all those traits, which is why the Rams were willing to pay him more money than the Panthers gave Morgan.

Witherspoon led the Panthers in tackles the past two seasons. Besides the unreliable Morgan, to help make up for Witherspoon's loss at weakside linebacker, the Panthers likely will turn to second-year player Thomas Davis, who struggled mightily at times while trying to

2006 Charlotte Weekly Track & Field Super Team

BOYS	SCHOOL	NOTEWORTHY
James Campbell	Myers Park	3rd in state high jump (6 feet, 4 inches)
John Curtiss	Providence	4th in state 1,600 meters (4:28.67), 8th in 1,000 meters (2:41.05)
Kevin Edwards	Vance	2nd in state 500 meters (1:05.93)
Trenton Guy Jr.	West Charlotte	2nd in state 55 meters (6.41 seconds), 16th in national 60 meters (6.99), 16th in national 200 meters (22.35)
Charles Johnson	Berry	2nd in state shot put (52 feet, 9.25 inches)
Alphonso Jordan	Hopewell	Won state triple jump (46 feet, 3.5 inches), Won national triple jump (49-01), 4th in state long jump (22-10), 12th in national long jump (22-10.25)
Kirt McReynolds	East Mecklenburg	2nd in state 55-meter hurdles (7.37 seconds), 5th in national 60-meter hurdles (7.99)
GIRLS	SCHOOL	NOTEWORTHY
Ashley Bethune	Harding University	3rd in state 55 meters (7.16 seconds), 4th in 55-meter hurdles (8.46), 13th in national 60-meter hurdles (9.01), 15th in national 60-meter dash (7.83)
Nyosha Bryant	Harding University	Won state long jump (18 feet, 4 inches)
Aslynn Halvorson	Butler	5th in state shot put (36 feet, 1.5 inches)
Kamorean Hayes	Harding University	Won national shot put (50 feet, 8 inches)
Lanaire Lindo	Vance	3rd in state 55-meter hurdles (8.36 seconds), 20th national 60-meter hurdles (9.26)
Rene Nelson	Harding University	2nd in state long jump (18 feet, 1.75 inches), 5th in state 55-meter hurdles (8.58 seconds)
Kimberly Spano	North Mecklenburg	2nd in state 1,600 meters (5 minutes, 22.24 sec.), 4th in state 3,200 meters (11:31.32 seconds)
COACH OF THE YEAR	SCHOOL	NOTEWORTHY
Rudolph Brown	Harding University	Led girls' team to a second-place finish in state meet

learn linebacker and safety last season.

Unless there's a major acquisition coming soon, the Carolina defense stands to suffer at two critical positions this coming season.

This isn't about Morgan's ability, though. This isn't about Morgan as a person, and I know it's not as if he intentionally gets hurt or likes it when it happens. The question, though, is this: Can the Panthers count on him to be there?

The answer is: no.

Sure, general manager Marty Hurney and his staff have a proven track record of making sound decisions. You don't take a team to two NFC Championship games in three years without it. And only time will tell if this gamble with Witherspoon and Morgan will pay off.

Just know you've got a better chance of getting every game in your NCAA tournament bracket correct. □