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Scholastic Spotlight

Lynch is on the fast track

Mom's guidance keeps two-sport star heading toward big things at St. Francis

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Akeel Lynch didn't need to be told Sunday was Mother's Day. No need to set a reminder on his Blackberry calendar.

Akeel Lynch made the decision to leave family and friends in Burlington, Ont., and finish high school at St. Francis while living with the family of a teammate in Amherst. Photo by John Hickey / Buffalo News

The sprinter from the St. Francis track and field team would never miss an opportunity to recognize the woman who has sacrificed so much in hopes that her son the track athlete could have the time of his life.

Lynch's mother, Dona, was born and raised in Jamaica, an island nation in the Caribbean. And while an estimated 1.3 million foreign tourists visit Jamaica every year, unemployment is high and the average yearly salary is \$3,000.

Seeking a better life, Lynch's parents moved to Toronto and started a family. When Lynch was in third grade, his father was shot and killed in Florida, leaving Dona to raise him and a young brother on her own.

"That's kind of my motivation throughout life basically is to do for her, and the fact she has to struggle basically raising two kids on her own," said Lynch. "Those days when you don't want to do your homework, and those days you want to take a day off -- I think about what my mom had to go through."

The fact Lynch was a gifted athlete became apparent at a young age. He started running track as a fifth grader and soon added football. He excelled in both, and as the years passed thoughts turned to taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by a U.S. high school, its higher level of competition and depth of coaching.

Lynch and his mom were there when St. Francis and coach Jerry Smith offered a free hour-long informational night in Burlington, Ont., for prospective football players.

So after attending St. Michael's College in Toronto for two years, Lynch made the difficult decision to leave his family and friends and finish high school in Athol Springs. He lives in Amherst with a football teammate and his parents.

"I finally made the decision that sometimes you have to take a path that some other people haven't taken to be great," said Lynch. "And I've never looked back. You have to give it a shot."

The 6-foot, 205-pound junior with 4.5 speed quickly found a home in the St. Francis backfield. Last fall he earned second team All-Western New York, rushing for 850 yards before a hand injury robbed him of the season's last five games. He had already rushed for five touchdowns in one game against St. Joe's.

Among those taking note of Lynch's breakout season was the University at Buffalo football program. Bolstered by a 92 academic average, he has already been offered a scholarship by the Bulls.

"He is a BCS-type player in all aspects be it athletically, academically and socially," said Smith. "He's the real deal, probably one of the best overall players we've ever had. He's getting faster and the thing is, he played at about 182 last year and now he's 205. We've got him pegged at about 210 this year and he's still running that fast."

His impact on the Red Raiders' track team has been immediate. His 11.12 in the 100 meters is the second-fastest time this year behind Section VI champion Wayne Gordon of Sweet Home. Lynch also runs the 200, 4x100 relay and throws the shot put. At Friday's Rodiek Relays, he anchored the winning 4x100 relay, which helped St. Francis clinch the title. His toughest test in the Monsignor Martin Association comes today when he faces Canisius sprinter Tom Spulecki in a home meet starting at 4 p.m.

"He's one of the best kids we've ever had here. He's got a gear I've never seen before in a St. Francis uniform," said Red Raiders coach Steve Otremba. "We had a kid break 50 [seconds] in the 400 and two kids under 23 seconds in the 200 a couple years ago -- I think he's faster than those boys."

Lynch is not sure where his athletic career will take him, but he is keenly aware of the woman who made it all possible. Looking back he marvels at his mother's advice.

"She was right nine out of 10 times ... the friends I shouldn't hang with, what I should do, when to come home, and I'm thinking: man, she was right," said Lynch. "I'm actually going to sit down and take in what she says because she's probably right. I know how much my mom means to me. Now that I'm away from home, you appreciate things more and more."

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