

# Athletes find track to success in USATF

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AP file/RICH PEDRONCELLI

Jeffery Henderson is a high-flying international track star who got his start competing in USA Track & Field events in Arkansas.

Mention sports or athletics and Arkansans' minds tend to go three places: basketball, baseball and football. For some, these sports are just fun to watch or play. But for others, they're a passport to success through scholarships and professional sports.

Representatives of USA Track & Field say people are overlooking another path, one with surer footing.

"The connection between all those sports is track and field," says Lottie Keaton, the USA Track & Field Arkansas Association's treasurer.

Walter Harris, vice president of the USA Track & Field Arkansas Association, is also a track coach. He says he's had many experiences with athletes who chose to focus on baseball or football but then have come back to him seeking to improve their speed or quicken their footwork.

He sees parents and students chasing dreams of diamond, court or gridiron glory only to find nothing at

the end of the rainbow. No scholarships. No contracts. There's just too much



competition.

Meanwhile, scholarships are available for track and field athletes.

"Track is probably one of the 'easiest' scholarships to make," Harris says. "Track is such an afterthought. It's crazy. I can almost guarantee a scholarship with track and field."

Too many promising youngsters and their coaches are unaware. Ray Gillespie, the organization's youth division chairman, notes that the University of Arkansas has one of the topranked track schools in the country — national champions year after year — and it still doesn't get the attention it deserves.

Track and field is a diverse category with specialties in cross-country, long distance, shorter distance, jumping and throwing. Athletes who are just mediocre at baseball might find they can excel if they focus solely on throwing.

The goal of USA Track & Field is threefold: to allow athletes to compete and be seen by coaches and agents, to help them get a college education and to give elite athletes the opportunity to try out for the U.S. Olympic team. USA Track & Field is the only organization that offers qualification for the Olympics in track and field; it allows young elite athletes to be seen on a national level.

In addition to reaching out to schools and local boys and girls clubs, the organization hosts meets and championships designed to spotlight promising athletes, encourage them to join the organization and connect them with coaches. One such event, the Junior Olympics Cross Country Championships, is scheduled for Nov. 22 at the former Western Hills Country Club. Individuals and teams then have the opportunity to advance to the national championships at Myrtle Beach, S.C., in December.

While the Junior Olympics category is open only to members of USA Track & Field, there's a nonmembers open category for youth, men, women and masters, and it also provides an opportunity where their talent can draw the attention of USA Track & Field officials and coaches

— who can help promising youngsters get on the path for advancement.

## HEALTHY COMPETITION

But the opportunities go beyond exercise and athletics. "This is an avenue to get you where you need to be and to make you a productive person and productive citizen in this world," Gillespie says.

"It's not only a sport but a lifestyle," Harris says.

With strict drug-testing rules, USA Track & Field athletes can be certain they're in a clean competition, not one inflated by stimulants and chemicals.

"You have drug testing," Keaton says. "That element itself separates those who are pure and true at the game versus those that have assistance to get to that level."

Healthful eating, discipline, training and sportsmanship are key to success in track and field, and those behaviors also translate into life success, Harris says.

"One of the biggest gifts I get in track and field is to watch how track changes lives and makes people better. I'm not saying everybody's going to get up to the elite level but if track can get you a free scholarship where you can have a better life — you don't have a chance in life without a degree. Track can give you that."

## HOW IT IS DONE

It sounds easy: just running around a track and winning a couple of races and ending up with a scholarship. It's not that simple. There's a process involving organized competitions and coaching.

"There are many, many kids who think they have the ability to run," Keaton says. "This avenue would allow us to observe them, determine their level of ability and have a coach coach them through that process."

That's where Gillespie and Harris come in. Gillespie recruits young people ages 8 to 18 to join USA Track & Field, coordinates meets, communicates with schools and clubs and keeps track of national events. "The face of the youth program," he also advises the youngsters, helping them move toward their goals of college or professional sports.

Those who are ready to advance will catch the eye of Harris. It's his job to find and nurture potential elite athletes, to train them and connect them with college coaches and agents. There's also a registry of approved coaches and clubs on the organization's site.

## HIGH FLIER

Harris points to one of their biggest success stories

— internationally ranked long jumper Jeffery Henderson, once a star athlete at Sylvan Hills High School in Sherwood. With his own perseverance and the discipline he acquired through track, Henderson graduated from college despite a learning disability. Now he's traveling the world as an elite athlete and being coached by the legendary Al Joyner.

Unlike other programs, USA Track & Field isn't only for teens and college stars. Participants can start as young as 8 and continue for the rest of their lives, from

youth to post-collegiate to masters level (age 40 and older).

"You can't do that with any other sport out there," Harris says. "That's one of the things I like about USATF. It can be a lifetime commitment. It can be a family commitment."

And while athletes in sports such as baseball and football generally have a short lifespan as competitors, track and field athletes, when properly trained, keep on going.

"Track, you can be 99 years old and still run the 100," Harris says. "Some of the best athletes in the world are in the masters level of USATF."

There are other organizations that nurture promising talent, Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), for example, but USA Track & Field is the only organization that will put athletes on the Olympic track. It's also the only avenue for becoming an official, like Harris, who says he has had the chance to see the world by officiating at international events.

Ultimately, many of the USA Track & Field youth athletes come back to Arkansas, where they become coaches and officials and mentors themselves, including Keaton, Gillespie and Harris.

"The three of us are living by example," Keaton says. "We need more Jeff Henderson stories, because they come back. They make this city more productive because now they recognize the struggle."

Interested athletes, parents and coaches can contact the Arkansas USA Track & Field at [usatf-ar.org](http://usatf-ar.org).