Francis Okereke interview

What piqued your interest in high jump?

In High School I used to play pick-up basketball and I enjoyed jumping and dunking. One day my friends asked me to join the track team and try and high jump. Even though I didn’t know much about the sport, I went to the try-out and made the team. I struggled for the first two meets because my form was horrendous but I knew that I could definitely get better. I think that my love for jumping and my want to get better are what motivated and interested me most to compete as a High Jumper.

1. As a senior how do you think you’ve developed since your freshman year?

As a freshman I was very nervous and inconsistent. My understanding of what it would take to become a great athlete and teammate have grown since then. I feel like my progression started slow as it took me until my first indoor meet sophomore year to reach 6ft at the collegiate level. Ever since that year I have set a new personal record at least once a year. I have seen improvement both in practices and at meets. This season I am about 2 inches away from reaching my goal of 6 feet and 5 inches!

1. What is your routine that you have developed over the years that you do every time before you jump?

In warm-ups I have to listen to music. I tend to listen to Rap music because it usually gets me hyped up. Before every jump I take I look at the bar and visualise clearing it. I take a second to think about what I have to do to clear the bar and then I look up clear my head and start my approach.

1. Can you explain how you are able to gain height in order to get over the bar when you end up going into it facing away?

From what I have seen most high jumpers run what is called a curve or a J. That is the part of a high jump approach where a jumper goes from running in a straight line to leaning out and away from the high jump bar. Although every jumper is different, the things I try to focus on to make me get the maximum height even when I am not facing the bar is to drive my knee up and away from the bar when I jump. When I am in the air over the bar, I dip my head back and drive my hips up and away from the bar. Timing these motions right is probably the hardest part of high jump for many people. Timing is key in high jump because if you bring your head back to quickly you can hit the bar with your back or even your head. Or if you drive your hips up too quickly you can land on the bar when your hips come back down and pop it off.

1. As a senior what are you hoping is a part of the high jumping legacy you leave behind after graduation?

I hope that my younger teammates learn something from me. One thing that I always tell my teammates is that it doesn’t matter what anybody else on another team is doing as it has no effect on your personal jumps. In high jump you are competing against yourself.

1. How do you hope to finish out your last season?

I want to win! My sophomore outdoor season we won the SUNYAC Conference championship as a team. Everyone really came together and embraced the team dynamic. I would like to finish at least in the top three for high jump and clear at least 6 feet 5 inches. I also compete in the triple jump and I would like to jump around 45 feet in that event. My last wish for my final outdoor season is score at least 10 points at outdoor SUNYAC’s and help win another Championship.

1. What are three of the things you will always remember about the sport itself and how its helped make you the person you are today?

Track and field is a rewarding sport. As a jumper, my events only last just a few seconds. However, the feeling of completing a great jump last forever. Winning the championship is easily the greatest team moment I’ve had competing for Brockport. My favorite moment in general would have to be High Jumping at last season’s Outdoor SUNYAC’s. Even though I came in ninth, it was the greatest competition I have been apart of. I set a personal record at the time at 6’2” and saw my friends and teammates Kevin and Damian set outdoor Personal Records also at 6’2”. I competed against the eventual national champion and many other talented jumpers. The last thing that will stay with me is one of the hardest parts of track and field for me to let go of. I have seen so many people struggle mentally and physically with track and field. I’ve seen people go four years without setting any personal records despite grinding and putting the work in at practice and in the weight room. I‘ve also seen the exact opposite in some very talented athletes. I even watched an Olympian set the world record in the SERC! That’s why I am dreading the day when I have to stop competing. I will miss all of the people I have interacted with in my four years. My coaches, teammates, other athletes and supporters have all helped to shape me into the person I am today and have helped teach me lessons and things I would have never learned if I hadn’t started jumping.