**RUNNING INTO HISTORY**

**Keith Ricks recently became the fastest track athlete ever at Tech and has his sights set on higher goals – while hoping to end a friendly family debate in the process**

By Marc Mullen

For the past 90 years, whoever has held the world record in the 100-meter dash – from Don Lippincott, who was first recognized by the International Association of Athletics Federation in 1912 to today’s record holder, Usain Bolt – has been dubbed the “World’s Fastest Man.”

With that in mind, it has taken more than 13 years for someone to supplant Tech sprinter André Davis for the title of Virginia Tech’s fastest man. In 1999, Davis posted a 10.24-second time in the 100. But that record finally went down as current senior sprinter Keith Ricks finished in 10.22 seconds at the University of Central Florida Invitational on March 24.

“It’s a great feeling, and I never really thought about it [breaking the record],” Ricks said. “I knew that I could be fast one day if I just kept working hard and kept sticking to my goals and kept doing the things that work for me. I knew I could be a great athlete. But it’s just completely mind-blowing that I’m actually approaching my goals. It may sound crazy, but it’s reachable. And I do believe that in the next few years, I can keep getting faster and do it.”

Ricks is now the Tech record holder in three events, as he also set the 200-meter record and was a member of the 4x100-meter relay that set a record at the invitational. In the 100-meter final, he finished second to professional Travis Padgett.

Of course, Ricks is used to being around professionals. In his career, he’s been around professionals and world-class athletes many times, which included seeing Bolt running at the Penn Relays in 2010, and he himself competing at the U.S. Junior Championships in Eugene, Ore., and representing the United States at the Junior Pan-American Championships in 2009.

“That was a great experience. Usain Bolt is known everywhere around the world, and it kind of gave me a frame of where I want to be in the future,” Ricks said. “I’m not saying that I am comparing myself to him, but just to be around professional athletes and with the possibility of being a professional athlete, and just competing against them, it just gave me inspiration.

“I think the first time that I realized that I could do this was when I was at the U.S. Junior Championships in Eugene. I realized that a lot of those guys up there were in my shoes maybe four years prior. So it kind of motivated me since then, maybe four years from now, I can be trying to make the U.S. Olympic team or just work toward that goal.

“Then, getting to represent the United States [at the Pan-Am Championships], it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity, and it felt good to go over there and wear ‘USA’ and wear the red, white and blue.”

Not a bad list of accomplishments for a man who only started in the sport of track and field six years ago and has seen more obstacles in his life than a competitor in the 110-meter hurdles. Coincidentally, Ricks’ first track coach wanted to mold him into a hurdler.

Ricks might have been a little too young to remember overcoming the first hurdle in his life. That came when he lost his mother, Mary, who died in a car accident when he was 3 years old. Many years later, he lost his father, Marvin, who passed away during Ricks’ freshman year in Blacksburg. His three siblings kept him focused after both tragedies.

“My mother and my father actually both passed away, and they are my biggest inspiration toward anything,” he said. “I’ve worked extremely hard to accomplish any goal that I’ve set, and my family has been an extremely strong backbone for me, in developing me and standing behind me and helping me accomplish those goals.

“But as far as what I remember about my parents, I remember a lot about my father primarily because he spent the most time around me. My mom, it was not as much, but it was some. My family always tried to keep her in my mind with memories of things we did and telling me about her. My dad also did the same thing, so that I would never forget.”

Another obstacle came when he transferred from Surry County [Va.] High School to King’s Fork [Va.] High School just before his junior year. Due to a family situation, Ricks moved in with older brother Marvin at a location that was about an hour from his old home.

Growing up, Ricks mostly played basketball. He was a 5-foot-8 point guard who could dunk by the age of 15, and he always had a basketball wherever he went, including to the track at Norfolk State University, where Marvin was an assistant coach.

“My brother actually thought that I would never be a track runner because I was just so stuck on basketball, and he always proposed that I do the high jump or pole vault,” Ricks said. “Everyone, it seems, always wanted me to do something else, except being a sprinter.

“But one day, I was just out on the track messing around, with my basketball, and then I just starting running. I don’t remember why or how far I ran, and he saw me. But it was his wife who noticed it first and said to him, ‘Wow, he’s got some speed!’

“My brother would never give me credit for running fast. I’ve never really thought about it, but it’s funny to look back and say to him, ‘So, you never thought I’d be able to run track, huh?’”

To understand the ribbing, it must be noted that Marvin was a five-time Division II All-American at Norfolk State and Ricks’ sister, Kisha, also ran there. But the person who recognized that talent – Marvin’s wife, Ruchelle – knows speed when she sees it, as she was also an All-American at Norfolk State and represented the Virgin Islands in the 1996 Summer Olympics.

So, growing up and now living in a house with NCAA plaques hanging everywhere definitely motivated the younger Ricks to go out for the track team. His new coach, Cecil Phillips, originally envisioned Ricks as a hurdler, but quickly scratched the idea.

“Yeah, he was going to make me a hurdler. He said that I had long legs, so let’s just try it out,” Ricks said. “But I never really jumped over hurdles, so that didn’t really work. I just stuck mostly with sprints and jumps. They [the hurdles] just got in the way.

“For me, that move [moving in with his brother] was life changing. When I was at Surry, I really didn’t do track at all. I tried it out, but I wasn’t really too serious about it. And the primary reason we had moved was because my father had gotten divorced [his father had remarried], so we moved, and we all stayed together. That transition kind of changed everything for me. It was difficult, but it was very good for me. I ran well and did well in school, so it worked out.”

Spending just two years at King’s Fork, Ricks turned out to be one of the best all-around sprinters in the state. He ran times that ranked in the top 10 of the state his senior year and also did a little long jumping.

So it came as no surprise that in late May of 2008, Ricks was looking to become the first state champion [Group AAA] in track and field history at the school. He had come up short during the indoor meet in March, but he came up short because of a hamstring injury during the finals. So did he become King’s Fork’s first state champion in school history?

“No,” he said with a bit of a laugh. “It was a heartbreaker. It was pretty rough because I lost by one thousandth of a second in the 200, and I also finished second in the 100. I lost to Tory Womack, who now runs at North Carolina A&T. But since then, he has never beaten me.

“But injuries definitely play a role in track and field, and it’s just a part of it. With track and field, when you’re up, you’re up. You have to put your best performances out there. But you have to deal with injuries and doing everything you can to keep your body together.

“That’s what I’ve been working on more now. I’ve been getting more experience in the sport and how to keep my body healthy and doing the extra small things that will help you through the whole season rather than just PR [personal record] for a week. Just doing the little things, that will help your body feel better for the next week.”

Injuries have certainly played a key role in Ricks’ career while at Tech. But he’s set his goals, approached those obstacles and overcome them.

That includes earning *his* first All-America honor at this year’s NCAA Men’s Indoor Track and Field Championships. It was his third NCAA meet overall and the second time he’s advanced in the indoor meet. He placed 12th in the 60 meters, running his second-fastest time ever in the event (6.62).

“I ran 6.62 indoors and that would have placed fifth indoors at the World Championships, and that didn’t even get me into the finals at nationals,” Ricks said. “It was extremely competitive at that meet, and in the past, I’ve had minor injuries that kind of withheld me from my best performances, but it felt great to go out there and be completely healthy and run a fast time.

“That has been one of my goals since I made national indoors in 2009. After you make nationals, it’s kind of like you are in the elite group anyway, and you expect to be there every year. It was just great to finally accomplish that goal, to be at nationals and be competitive and be an All-American.”

The next goals upcoming for the senior are a solid outdoor season, completed by advancing to his second NCAA outdoor meet, earning another All-America honor and qualifying for the U.S. Olympic Trials.

Interestingly, if it weren’t for the wind, Ricks’ school record time would have given him the Trials “B” standard. Maybe with an invitation to the event, Ricks could put to rest the debate as to who is the fastest Ricks.

“My brother, Marvin, he’s competitive, so he’ll claim that he’s the best sprinter because he has all the All-America plaques everywhere,” said Ricks, who is 20 years younger than Marvin. “I’ve been seeing those things since I was 5. He has plaques everywhere and will remind me all the time that he’s the best.

“He always talks about how our family just has this natural talent to be sprinters and that came from my mom and dad. We also talk a lot about the things that are going to help me on the track. It’s not like we are butting heads or anything. He wants to see me do well, and sometimes, he gets more excited than I do when I do well.”

Then he finally answered the question as to who is faster and did so in typical brother fashion.

“But I would say me.”