

Athlete Profile
Ke'Nyia Richardson

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Ke'Nyia Richardson loves to travel. The 18-year-old from Oakland, Calif. has already journeyed to Canada, China, and Brazil, all before graduating high school. Last March, the recent Holy Names High School (Oakland, Calif.) graduate did some flying of her own. With a hop, a skip, and a jump, Richardson crushed the girls' indoor national high school record in the triple jump with a leap of 13.57 meters/44 feet, 6.25 inches. The former mark of 43-11.5 had stood untouched for 16 years. Now, that's some kind of flying.



Don Gosney Photo

Ke'Nyia Richardson

"When I looked at her, I knew she could jump further than she had been jumping," Taylor said. "What she's doing now is not anything I expected from the beginning. I thought she could be a good, solid 39- or 40-foot jumper."

Perhaps, destiny has played a part in Ke'Nyia's penchant for travel. Her name comes from a continent she has yet to visit.

"I came up with the name Ke'Nyia out of a Swahili book," explained Ke'Nyia's mother, Lisa Richardson. "It's one of the largest lakes in Africa. Lake Ke'Nyia."

Lisa, who was a 400 meter runner in high school, had hoped her daughter would run track, as both she and her sister had done.

As a high school freshman, Ke'Nyia Richardson wasn't an instant track and field superstar, but she showed promise. Curtis Taylor, a 12-year coaching veteran of the East Oakland Youth Development Center (EOYDC) Track Club, remembers his first meeting with the young athlete in 2003.



Don Gosney Photo

By her sophomore year, Richardson had already surpassed Taylor's expectations. At the 2005 California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) State Track and Field Championships, she placed second in the triple jump with a wind-aided leap of 42-2.75, the nation's best sophomore mark of the year. In June, her runner-up performance of 12.82m/42-00.75 at the USA Junior Outdoor Track & Field Championships qualified her for the Pan Am Junior Athletics Championships in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. The then 15-year-old (the youngest member of the U.S. Junior National Team) placed a solid fifth in her event with a mark of 12.67m/41-6.82.

It would be easy for a 15-year-old to get a bit cocky about these achievements, but Richardson seems to keep it all in perspective.

"I just always wanted to go to college and to succeed in track at the same time because I had the ability," she said. "All of my family members have been a huge influence in keeping me humble."

Steady Improvement

Even better marks were to come in 2006. As a junior, Richardson captured the CIF State Championship in the triple jump, and was runner-up in the 100 meter hurdles. Her triple jump mark of 43-3.25 bested her closest competitor by more than 19 inches, and was the best mark in the nation that year. Richardson repeated her winning ways at USA Junior Outdoors, jumping 12.85m/42-02.00 to win the event and qualify for the IAAF World Junior Championships in Beijing, China. In Beijing, she tied for 12th with a 12.97m/42-6.75 leap, but missed the cut for finals due to a shorter second best jump than her competitor.

Far from being discouraged by not making the finals at Junior Worlds, Ke'Nyia set herself up for a record-breaking senior year.

"Mentally, she's just nails," said Coach Taylor. "She is a kid that if she puts her mind to something and decides 'this is what I want to do' then she's going to go out and get it done."

Apparently, being a record breaker in her senior year of competition was on Richardson's "to do" list. In March of 2007, she broke Julia Yendork's 1991 indoor national high school record (43-11.5) at the National Scholastic Indoor Championships (NSIC) at the Armory in New York City. Ke'Nyia's leap of 44-6.75 put her in the record books and won the competition.

"My goal was the record. My mind was really set on that when I came out there to jump," said Richardson. "For this meet, I did what I came to do."

"Every jump, I would do one thing right. I got my second phase right, and then on my second jump, I would lose something on my first phase. I knew it was all there. I just had to put everything together. Even though I was doing some things wrong, my jumps were still big. I had a feeling I could do really well if I put all of my phases together."

During the 2007 outdoor season, the newly minted indoor national record holder went on to jump a breathtaking 45-4.25 (wind aided) at the CIF State Championships, successfully defending her title. She also placed second in the long jump, and third in the 100 meter hurdles.

Then, last June, 17-year-old Richardson did something quite unusual. At the USA Outdoor Track & Field Championships in Indianapolis, she entered *both* the USA Junior and Senior (open) competitions. The competition days were back-to-back, with the Senior championships occurring first. Richardson placed sixth in the Senior competition, leaping 13.51m/44-04.00. Fourth place and fifth place were a mere 0.75 and 0.25 inches, respectively, ahead of her. When asked why she passed on her last jump, Coach Taylor explained:

"The plan was to get any combination of four jumps. I didn't want her to take more than four jumps. I just told her, 'just jump for fun, let's just go out and have a good time.' I believe

that if she didn't have the Juniors in front of her the next day, she would have jumped a lot farther. When she got to Juniors, she was happy that I had limited her because she said she was really tired."

Tired or not, the next day, Richardson won her second straight USATF Junior Outdoor title with a mark of 13.47m/44-02.50, which qualified her for the USA Junior team headed to the Pan American Junior Athletics Championships in São Paulo, Brazil. In São Paulo, Richardson captured gold in the triple jump with a personal best leap of 13.55m/44-5.5.

"I put that (win) in a whole different category because I've never won a meet as big as that," Richardson said about her Pan Am championship. "I've been to these meets before, but I've never won. I think I've gotten mentally stronger, and that definitely helped me in this meet because I was losing for a larger part of the competition, which I'm not really used to. It took a lot of mental strength to come back from that."

A Rising Future

Mental fortitude is something Lisa Richardson agrees is one of her daughter's defining characteristics.

"Ke'Nyia is very strong-willed," Lisa Richardson asserted. "She's very analytical. She takes her time, she thinks, in all aspects of her life, which is a blessing."

This fall, Richardson is attending the University of California, Los Angeles, which sought her as a track and field recruit. She'll be sorely missed by Coach Taylor, who describes her as "a really good team leader."

Taylor laughed as he recalled when, as a sophomore, Ke'Nyia contemplated taking three weeks off of training to visit a number of colleges on an organized college tour. Coach Taylor told her that if she kept improving, colleges would pay her to visit them. Now, Richardson and her coach joke about her money-saving decision to train through those three weeks.

"She's a tremendous athlete, a hard worker," said Coach Taylor. "If she maintains her focus and does well, I think she can be a great jumper. I think whatever she chooses to do, she's going to be good at it."

Does Ke'Nyia Richardson see athletic greatness in her future at UCLA?

"I'm not really sure what I want to do as far as track in the future," Richardson said, "so that's why I chose a university that cares a lot about my academics. I'm just going to be humble about the experience. I'm really looking forward to the athletic part, but mostly the academic part because you're studying things you want to learn about."

Whether flying through college classes or through the air, it's a good thing that UCLA is close to a major airport—because flight is definitely in this young lady's future. ■