



SPORTS

16-Year-Old Sprints Right Into Professional Track

By LINDSAY CROUSE DEC. 17, 2015

ATLANTA — When Candace Hill became the fastest teenage girl the United States has ever clocked, sprinting 100 meters in 10.98 seconds in June, she was suddenly good enough not only to qualify for next summer’s Rio Olympics, but also to potentially win a medal there. Now, at age 16, she has become the youngest track athlete in the United States to turn professional.

Hill is the latest in a recent wave of talented young runners — all female — to join the professional ranks while still in high school, going straight to salaried racing and leapfrogging the traditional step of collegiate competition. This is a path that not even Olympic gold medalists like Carl Lewis, Jackie Joyner-Kersey or Edwin Moses took.

“It’s the era of the girl in general,” said Lauren Fleshman, a professional runner and five-time N.C.A.A. champion at Stanford. “Women have never been more marketable in sports than they are now, from U.S. soccer to Serena. Forty-plus years since Title IX means we have our first generation of supportive parents and coaches who grew up with the idea of female athletes not being horrifying. People are training girls harder than ever.”

She added, “Skipping college is attractive for three reasons: money, fame and momentum.”

Allyson Felix turned professional instead of running for the University of Southern California in 2003, going on to become one of the most successful American sprinters in history. Felix remained the only track athlete to bypass college for professional running until a decade later, when the middle-distance runner Mary Cain signed with Nike in 2013 at age 17 before enrolling at the University of Portland. She opened the floodgates.

Cain was followed by the distance runner Alexa Efraimson, who signed with Nike at age 17 in 2014. Earlier this year, Kaylin Whitney, who set the high school 100-meter record before Hill shattered it, signed with Nike on her 17th birthday. The middle-distance runner Ajee' Wilson turned pro right after high school instead of competing in college in 2012.

But none of them stood out the way Hill does. Her potential is considered so outsize that she brokered an unusual arrangement with Asics, a running footwear and apparel company. It will cover full tuition for Hill, who has a 4.6 grade-point average and top-10 class ranking in her magnet school near Atlanta, at any college that admits her. The contract, which at 10 years is also uncommonly long, effectively serves as an athletic scholarship, even though Hill, who plans to attend college while competing, will not be eligible to race collegiately. (Asics and Hill declined to discuss the financial terms of the arrangement.)

“Candace is as good a student as she is an athlete, and we found that intriguing,” said Gene McCarthy, the chief executive of Asics America Group. “For us, she’s a Halley’s comet of sport, a teenager who’s tremendously gifted in both mind and body. With that talent and drive, we’re betting that she can be the fastest woman in the world someday.”

Hill’s ascendance from the youth sprinting scene in Georgia to the national and now international arena has taken place over a matter of months, as she emerged from an ordinary high school track team with little specialized training. She lost her first race in high school, to an upperclassman, and won

every one since.

Now, instead of running high school races she will enter the international professional racing circuit, competing for financial prizes against the world's fastest runners.

She is still very much a high school junior, switching easily between talking about her wanting to win every race she runs to taking trackside selfies with Usain Bolt, discussing her gown for when she was voted to the homecoming court this year and lamenting the missing A in her report card. ("Chemistry. ...") For breakfast on race days, she eats Froot Loops.

"Turning professional now was a hard decision because I can't keep running high school track with my team or run in college," she said. "But I want to get faster, and it seems time for the next step."

The looming Olympic trials, to be held next July in Eugene, Ore., have expedited the timeline for turning professional because of the training and financial benefits such status confers. Hill is the youngest track athlete to qualify for the United States trials in both the 100 and 200 meters, and has logged the eighth-fastest time by an American woman in the 100 this year.

"There's something magical about breaking 11 in the 100, especially so young, and that's when she emerged," Hill's agent, Mark Wetmore, said. "It didn't seem worth it for her to compete at the college level anymore because even as a sophomore she had already transcended that field. Suddenly she is in almost every conversation about the future of the event."

Her 10.98 at the end of her sophomore year in high school would have placed third at the N.C.A.A. Division I outdoor championships last year. (It also would have tied for silver at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.)

Regardless of an athlete's talent, turning professional as a high school runner remains relatively rare, especially because it means forgoing a college

track scholarship.

“The value of being a top high school track athlete has traditionally been paid in college tuition, which can be roughly a quarter of a million dollars, regardless of whether you go pro after,” Wetmore said. “A dwindling number of professional track athletes are able to support themselves through the sport alone.”

Before the deal with Asics, Hill considered U.S.C. or Florida for their strong sprinting programs. She hopes to study biology and later enter sports medicine or become a sports journalist. Given the limited number of full scholarships available in track and field, it can be difficult to match an ideal college program to a coach.

But now she is a part of the trend of teenagers turning pro. The other runners who have made the jump in recent years have had mixed results, with some struggling to maintain their competitive edge after turning professional, an issue sometimes attributed to the additional stress of higher training loads on younger bodies.

Asics and her development team have said they are committed to letting Hill develop at her own pace — ensured by a contract that lasts through her peak athletic years, until she is 26.

“What’s intriguing is that she got so good so suddenly, and didn’t change anything in her routine,” Wetmore said. “So moving forward, we think it’s important to avoid changing anything other than the people in the other seven lanes.”

That also means, according to her contract, that she will still go to prom — and probably also continue to work on homework between racing heats at track meets. Her father, Gary Hill, recalls driving furiously from a meet to a coffee shop so she could use the Wi-Fi to submit an assignment for a class on time.

“My teachers are really supportive, but when I have a deadline I don’t get extensions,” Hill said. “They joke, ‘World champions have to do their homework, too.’ ”

As Hill’s parents continue to drive her to school and practice each day, Asics will also arrange for her father, who is a technician for United Airlines, and her mother, Lori Hill, a mental health clinician, to accompany her to all of her meets, along with her younger sister, Rachel.

“We were just going to the meets, and supporting her,” Gary Hill said. “Her winning fascinated us. She’s just that good. But going professional was unexpected. I have a trophy full of state plaques, and there is room for two years’ more. But she passed all of that.”

One thing that has changed is Hill’s training: She began working with a new coach 10 weeks ago, moving to Tony Carpenter after her record-setting sprint in June. (Asics says it will not influence her coaching choices but will help support them.) Carpenter will collaborate with her high school coach and others.

Carpenter has coached track athletes for the past 20 years, including world youth champions and professional sprinters like the Jamaican Olympic medalist Veronica Campbell-Brown. Now that Hill has no high school team, Carpenter has curated a group of top regional athletes of all ages for Hill to train with.

“We’re focused on longevity,” Carpenter said. “We want to keep things fun and normal for Candace while she’s still in high school.”

Carpenter said that when he first saw Hill race, when she was 13, he was struck by her natural talent and competitive nature.

“She has always showed a lot of promise, and given how young she is, I think we’re just seeing the beginning of what she can do,” he said. “She has

only been running for four years. She didn't even come to track from soccer or some other sport. She came from the little races in her middle school's field day."

Hill says she is focusing on building her speed while managing her new fast track, in both school and sports.

"I still get nervous whether it's a local meet or one on the world stage," she said. "Because you never know what's going to happen. You never know how much better you can get."

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