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The fastest school in the world

Tomorrow hundreds of Jamaica's top track and field prospects gather for the opening day of the National High Schools' Athletic Championships. Usain Bolt, Asafa Powell and Veronica Campbell-Brown all launched their careers competing in the annual event, yet one school stands head and shoulders above the rest. spikesmag.com takes a look at Vere Technical High School and why it has proved the breeding ground for many great female sprint champions.

Imagine a school so strong at sprinting that a future two-time Olympic 200m

champion was once only ranked the fifth best sprinter there. Scarcely believable? The stuff of fantasy? Well, not exactly. This is precisely the position Veronica Campbell-Brown, arguably currently the world's No.1 female sprinter, found herself in during the early phase of her life as a student at Vere Technical High School.

Nestled in the sugar-producing region of Clarendon, **Vere Tech opened its doors in 1961 and has developed into one of the great hotbeds of Jamaican track and field**, particularly on the women's side.

The school has captured the prestigious Jamaican High School Girls' Championships more than 25 times and is one of the few selected schools to ever be inducted in the Penn Relays Hall of Fame – one of the great US meetings.

Alumni include eight-time Olympic sprint medallist **Merlene Ottey**, **Deon Hemmings**, the 1996 Olympic 400m hurdles champion, and former World Championship 400m bronze medallist **Michael Blackwood**. Yet one statistic stands out above all others. Vere Tech has produced FOUR of the 65 women who have dipped below 11 seconds for the 100m – Ottey (10.74) Campbell-Brown (10.85) **Simone Facey** (10.95) and **Beverley McDonald** (10.99) – fairly impressive stuff.

Olive Forrester, head of PE for 11 years, has seen many athletes come and go at the school and has an interesting theory as to why Vere has achieved great success, particularly in women's track and field.

"Most of our boarders at the school are girls," she explains. "This means **we know how they eat, how they sleep and the training that goes on. We get to know the girls really well.**"

The 1800 pupil school is also known for its high academic achievements, but sport and the discipline it engenders is also of huge importance. Its **pupils are encouraged to train not twice or three times but five times-a-week – Monday to Friday.**

Pupils have set times for breakfast and dinner and it is lights out at 10pm for all boarders.

One of the most decorated of their current alumni is the diminutive Campbell-Brown, the reigning World 100m champion and a two-time Olympic 200m champion.

Born and raised in Trelawny, the same parish as triple Olympic sprint champion Usain Bolt, she started attending Vere as a boarder aged 12 and explains: "Track and field was a huge focus [at Vere] I would think it is the No.1 sport," Campbell-Brown insisted. **"Track and field was one of the higher ranked sports because of the history they have at the Jamaican High**

School Championships.”

The facilities were modest – a basic gym and grass track – but the competition was unforgiving.

During one of the first years at the school, Campbell-Brown was merely the fifth ranked sprinter of girls of her own age or one year older. She was even encouraged to step up in distance.

“At one point my coach wanted me to run the 400m because I could not make the sprint team,” she explained. “In 1997 I actually ran the 400m at the High School Championship. I didn’t do too well, I didn’t really like it – the 400m was not for me.”

She refused to be downcast and used the high standards around her as a motivation. Campbell-Brown improved her start, made the Penn Relays and qualified for the Jamaican team for the 2000 IAAF World Junior Championships in Chile where **she became the first woman in the history of the event to compete in the 100m-200m double at that event.**

Yet Campbell-Brown insists she also owes a lot of her future success to her time as a boarder at the school.

“We had people there to look after us and cook for us but I also had to do a lot of stuff on my own because I was away from home,” she said. **“I had to press my uniform, comb my hair and wash my clothes. I learned a lot from Vere High School, such as discipline, hard work and determination.** All these factors contributed to my career and the person I am today.”

Campbell-Brown still fondly recalls her time at Vere Tech and described her last visit to the school – in the wake of her most recent Olympic success – as “overwhelming”.

But why does she feel the school has performed so well at track and field?

“There is a tradition that one person can do it and then another believes they can keep [the tradition] going,” she explained. **“I believe that there are many more girls from Vere who will come through and I think it is to do with the tradition and the history.”**

Today the track and field programme is headed by 1964 and 1968 Jamaican Olympian Neville Myton and **the school is predicted to enjoy more success at the Jamaican High School Track and Field Championships which begin tomorrow (1 Apr).**

Quite simply, as leading Jamaican athletics journalist and IAAF correspondent Anthony Foster

says: "Athletics is to Vere and it is to Jamaica. You cannot talk about athletics and the name Vere does not come up."

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