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## 'Million-dollar legs' carry Knight into national spotlight

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Greg Jenson/The Clarion-Ledger

**Ridgeland High School senior classmates Rachel Givan (left) and Bianca Knight are The Clarion-Ledger Sports People of the Year, the first high school athletes so honored by this newspaper.**

The shades of two-toned blue she wears are synonymous with Ridgeland athletics, so there's little doubt Bianca Knight is somehow still in high school.

At first glance, she even looks like a normal 17-year-old, attached at the ear to a cell phone as she walks to the fieldhouse after school.

But those powerful legs that carry her across the high school campus are a dead-giveaway that this isn't your typical teenager.

"I don't know if everyone at this school gets it, really," Ridgeland track coach Calvin Bolton said. "But that's a pair of million-dollar legs walking around the hallways. I really believe 10 years from now we'll be proud to tell people we were at the same school she was."

But before that future begins, Knight, The Clarion-Ledger's 2006 co-Sportsperson of the Year, has five more months to finish what is arguably the best prep track and field career in the history of the state.

Sprinting's her forte - she's won 12 Mississippi individual high school state titles since the seventh grade. But that barely hits the surface of what makes her "million-dollar legs" so special.

In May, Knight was named Gatorade's National Track Athlete of the Year as a junior, a very rare accomplishment for an underclassman. She was also the first Mississippian to win the honor.

In August, Knight ran the lead leg of a 4x100 relay team that set a U.S. junior national record of 43.29 seconds in August.

And those are just the high points of a resume that includes championships in Morocco, Puerto Rico and all over the United States.

"I'm sure I could be playing a lot of different sports, but track was perfect for me," Knight said. "What you put into it is what you get out of it. There's no team to back you up. I have nothing against team sports, but I really love track because it's all on me. Nothing else."

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**SUNDAY**

### KNIGHT RESUME

#### Accomplishments

- Gatorade National Girls Track Athlete of the Year for 2006, the first Mississippian to win the honor.
- Ran the lead leg of a 4x100-meter relay team that set the U.S. junior record of 43.29 seconds in August.
- Twelve Mississippi state meet sprint titles, including last season's 100 meters in a state meet-record 11.40 seconds.
- International competitions in Morocco and Puerto Rico.

#### Future plans

- Knight has signed to compete in 2008 at the University of Texas, a top-10 national program. She has

hinted at turning pro following her freshman season.

Since Knight discovered track six years ago with the help of her mom, she's been hooked. Knight was 12 years old when she went to her first formal practice. Her former coach, Edmond Donald, did what he always does with the newcomers - line them up on the track at Jackson State and tell them to run as fast as they can.

"Bianca had no concept of what the lanes were or anything and she still blew everyone away," Donald said. "It didn't take long to figure out she had a natural ability that was phenomenal."

That promising first day on the track has erupted into full-blown teenage domination.

And don't expect it to stop at high school. Knight has signed scholarship papers with the University of Texas, meaning in August she will join one of the most successful women's track programs in the country.

She considered signing a professional contract after high school, but is comfortable with her decision to go to Texas - at least for a year.

"Running in the NCAA (nationals) is something that looks incredible," Knight said. "That's one thing I'd like to do in my career. But if I have the kind of season I think I can have, then turning pro will certainly be an option."

There's also the 2007 World Championships in Japan and the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Knight hopes to qualify for both and at least one U.S. coach says the goal is quite attainable.

"I have no doubt you'll see Bianca on an Olympic medal stand within six years," U.S. women's sprint development coach Danny Williams said. "Two-thousand-eight in Beijing might be pushing it just a little, but it certainly wouldn't shock me. But it's probably 2012 that we're really looking at as her year."

Dozens of premium sprinters have come and gone during Williams' career. Some have panned out; others have fizzled. What makes him so sure Knight will succeed has little to do with running and everything to do with a personality and confidence rarely seen in a teenager.

"The way she carries herself is probably the most impressive," Williams said. "Obviously, she's a hard worker who has the times we need to see. But she's also the kind of young woman you want to build the image of your track program around. We're thrilled about the possibilities. She just needs to continue to show progress."

Knight maintains a prodigious training regimen with local coach Darryl Woodson (usually 30 hours a week), working towards the indoor track season that begins in January.

This spring, she'll continue her assault on the record books while filling her unofficial role as Ridgeland's assistant track coach.

There's still some unfinished business before Knight tries to earn her place in the national elite - helping Ridgeland win a second Class 4A state team title.

"Bianca's like another coach, but she's always helping and never acting like she's better than us," senior teammate Kendra Haymer said. "She's an amazing athlete, but that doesn't stop her from being a great friend. We're laughing and joking constantly. She's never serious except for during a meet."

These days, Knight has little competition in Mississippi. But a bittersweet end to her junior season has made her last year more important.

At last year's state finals, she won the 100 in a state meet-record time of 11.40 seconds but tweaked a hamstring at the end of the race. That kept her from running the 200 and 400, and Ridgeland eventually lost the team title.

Dropping out of the finals wasn't a big deal personally, said Knight. She's won a boatload of individual medals, but losing the team trophy hurt.

"Individually, high school track isn't even that fun because I've been winning for so long," Knight said. "But there's a lot less pressure and I really do want us to win another state title."

Knight's training for this spring comes with a bit of a twist, because this time she's recovering from a torn right hamstring suffered in August when competing in Oregon.

She sat out about two months before returning to the track, but is determined to be back stronger.

Her first test under fire comes Friday at the LSU Indoor High School Invitational where she'll compete in the 55-meter dash.

"It's incredibly scary to have something like that happen," Knight said. "You worry if you can come back and still compete at a high level. But now I've healed and added some weight training to my routine."

So for a few more months, Mississippi gets to watch Knight as a high school athlete. And if all goes as she hopes, she'll be celebrating a state title with her teammates come May.

After that, don't be surprised to see Knight on a Wheaties box within a few years, that two-toned Ridgeland letter jacket replaced by the red, white and blue of the United States.

"I'm ready," Knight said. "I've been winning high school state championships for what seems like forever, so I'm looking forward to the new challenge. This is what I feel like is my calling."

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