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Putting Saint Lucia on the Track: A Conversation With Olympic Champion Julien Alfred

From humble beginnings to historic victories, Julien Alfred reflects on her journey from Ciceron in St. Lucia to Olympic glory, the support of her island nation, and her mission to inspire the next generation of Saint Lucian athletes

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“It still feels surreal,” says Julien Alfred, the Saint Lucian sprint sensation who won her country’s first two Olympic medals in the 2024 Paris Games. In an exclusive interview with the Consortium’s Nelcia Charlemagne, Ms. Alfred says she’s still at a loss for words to accurately describe her monumental achievement.

At only 23 years old, Ms. Alfred represents the pinnacle of Saint Lucian sporting achievement; winning gold in the 100m sprint and silver in the 200m race. While the newly-crowned Olympic Champion may not have the words to adequately capture this moment of triumphant glory for her and her island, her name flows easily from the lips of people worldwide. On the Olympic Games' YouTube channel, as of press time her [winning race](#) has been viewed over 2.1 million times in the six days since it has been posted.

Now that she has returned from Paris to her base in the United States, reality has begun to set in. "I think slowly but surely, I'm beginning to realize the accomplishments that I had earlier this month," Ms. Alfred said. Looking relaxed and rested following her grueling Olympic schedule, she disclosed that she is nevertheless already back on the racetrack, training for the Diamond League meet in Zurich on September 5 and Diamond League finals, set for September 13 and 14 in Brussels.

Alfred's story started at the Ciceron R.C Combined School, a primary school in a community on the outskirts of Castries, Saint Lucia's capital. She credits school librarian Brenda Virgil, as well as educators Edwin Norbert and Simeon Stephen for recognizing her athletic potential. Unfortunately, Mr. Stephen passed away in December 2023, missing the chance to see his former student reach Olympic stardom.

It was Ms. Virgil who spoke effusively of Alfred's talents to Cuthbert "Twa Ti Né" Modeste, coach of the track club "Survivors." At nine years old, she joined Survivors, but a family tragedy interrupted her budding athletic career. "I actually stopped running in grade six when my dad passed away in 2013 and then Twa Ti Né came back to look for me in Ciceron," Ms. Alfred shared. Financial struggles associated with the change in family dynamics, she said, made things difficult. However – in a story well known to Ciceron residents – Twa Ti Né refused to let the athletic talents of this young prodigy go to waste. "He came to Ciceron, he looked for me to come back," she recounted. "He waited for me at the Ciceron bus stop every single time, and took me to the Mindoo Phillip Park for training," recalled the current World Indoor 60m Champion, beaming at the memory. She represented the club regionally, and after graduating from primary school attended the Leon Hess Comprehensive Secondary School in Saint Lucia before leaving for a high-performance athletic high school in Jamaica.

Ms. Alfred's athletic prowess caught the attention of Coach Edrick Floréal, a powerhouse of Haitian origin who recruited her to the University of Texas. Ms. Alfred credits him for her latest athletic successes. "We've been through the highs and the lows. In 2019 he sent me home. He sent me home because I was just so young. I got injured in 2019 and I was like, I want to go home. He allowed me to go home, get myself together and come back to Texas to just continue on the journey," Julien told the Consortium. A clip of Coach Flo comforting Julien after a poor showing has gone viral, with his firm but affirming manner endearing him to Julien's supporters.

"He's somebody I felt like that was just meant to be part of my journey," said Alfred about Coach Flo, recalling how she followed him and his athletes even before being recruited by the man himself. She spoke about the self-doubt that plagued her earlier this year. "Right after [the] World Indoor Championship, I wanted to give up," Ms. Alfred admitted in one of the interview's several vulnerable moments. "I felt like there was so much pressure on me, especially after visiting Saint Lucia. I felt like, look at my country celebrating me, I have to go to the Olympics and do the exact same thing. Each time I step on the track, my country is watching," she disclosed. Coach Flo, she says, provided the mentorship that allowed her to focus on the task ahead – her next big event. "He helped me switch that pressure into motivation. Now we've seen the fruits of his labor, and how much he has poured into me as a person, [and] as an athlete."

Rather than being crushed by the pressure of representing the entirety of her tiny island's Olympic hopes and dreams, Alfred says she was buoyed, humbled and overwhelmed by the sheer scale of support at home in Saint Lucia during the Olympic Games. "I didn't know that there was a watch party for me," she said, visibly awestruck. On the days of both the 100m and 200m finals, Saint Lucians gathered in the city and major towns to watch their "JuJu" run in real-time. Powered by an island of only 180,000, the nickname nevertheless reverberated around the globe loudly enough that Olympic commentators adopted the sobriquet by the time she made her silver-medal sprint.?

For Ms. Alfred, the tidal wave of support from her fellow Lucians "makes my heart happy...whether or not I won a medal, just getting the country together, makes me feel proud that I was able to do that." The spirit of jubilation continues in Julien Alfred's home country, with Prime Minister Philip J Pierre promising a holiday in her honor. The Consortium understands that the logistics of her return are currently being finalized.

"Going back to my roots," is one of Alfred's main priorities when she returns to Saint Lucia - immediately after celebrating with her fellow citizens during what is sure to be a huge official homecoming event. Earlier this year, she dismissed claims about competing on Team USA, making it pellucid that she would only compete for her home country, Saint Lucia. Having left the island in 2015 to attend St. Catherine High School in Jamaica, Julien has not actively lived in Saint Lucia for nearly 10 years. "Even before I won the gold at the Olympics, I was talking about how much I need to go back home and go back to what I know - go back to my roots and just relax." Among her plans: eating as many plates of bakes and saltfish and drinking as many mugs of cocoa tea as she can. "Nothing beats that for me," she said gleefully.

Apart from indulging in the comforts of home, the Olympic champion says she's excited about continuing the work of the Julien Alfred Foundation. "It comes from my own story, the struggles growing up. Sometimes we didn't have running shoes," she explained. Athletic clubs in developing countries like Saint Lucia are often severely underfunded, making Julien's Olympic wins even more impressive.?

In a reminder of the island's rich sporting pedigree, however, Ms. Alfred thanked fellow Saint Lucian Olympian Levern Spencer and former NCAA pentathlon record holder Makeba Alcide for supporting young athletes like herself. "Maybe I wouldn't have been there today without them giving back to me," she mused. Now, she wants to play her part in the development of athletes back home. "We don't know how many more Olympians we can have. We don't know how many World Champions we can have."?

Ciceron, where Alfred grew up, is an economically challenged community. "There are so many people in this area that had to miss school because their parents couldn't afford to send them to school, or had no lunch money. They just couldn't afford it." It's that reality - all too common around the country - that's inspiring her foundation's work. Her dedication to and focus on her philanthropic efforts is evidently just as intense as her commitment to her sport.?

"As a competitor, you go into a race to win," Ms. Alfred told the Consortium, expressing a sentiment that succinctly sums up her approach to her career. She is however able to face disappointment with equanimity. As many analysts have already concluded, Ms. Alfred says fatigue got in the way of another Olympic gold medal in the women's 200m. "I don't want to have any excuses whatsoever, but I'm human as well," she remarked. "Six races in five days was a lot, with no break at all." Having managed to get only two hours of sleep between the 100M final and the 200M heats, she noted that male athletes who competed in the same races were afforded time to rest. Nonetheless, Ms. Alfred says she's thrilled to have claimed another medal for Saint Lucia,

especially after coming off the turn with what she acknowledges was not the best technique. “Coming off the turn, I think my execution was poor...I just really had to dig so hard for that silver medal at that point,” Julien recounted.

Ms. Alfred’s Olympic achievements have been added to the list of pairs that bring Saint Lucians pride: the famous twin peaks of the Pitons, their two Nobel Laureates, and now two Olympic medals in the most popular events of the games. Her feat will stand for years to come as a beacon of inspiration for Saint Lucians, Caribbean people, and those across the world who learned of the power of Julien Alfred on August 3 and 6, 2024.

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