

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Keep Your Eyes On Nia Jack, A Young Virgin Islander Already Winning Gold In Track And Field

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ST. CROIX -- In a room inside the St. Croix Educational Complex library, a small crowd of family, friends and well-wishers gathered to witness Nia Jack and Rodney Griffin sign what is called a "National Letter of Intent", to receive scholarships totaling over \$180,000 over four years, in exchange for participation in their respective universities' track and field program.

Ms. Jack will receive a full scholarship of \$25,000 yearly, while Mr. Griffin will receive \$16,000 annually, which climbs to \$21,000 when financial aid is factored in. However, while both athletes' future shows promise, Ms. Jack's passion for the sport and her mother's determination to see her daughter excel is the focus of this story.

By the looks of it, Ms. Jack is reserved and soft-spoken. When handed the mic to give remarks on Thursday, she thanked God and her teammate, Mr. Rodney, allowed that she was "overwhelmed with joy," and proceeded to give the mic away.

But don't let her quiet nature and seemingly timid demeanor fool you: Ms. Jack is a dedicated athlete who sees the track as her domain and all opponents her prey.

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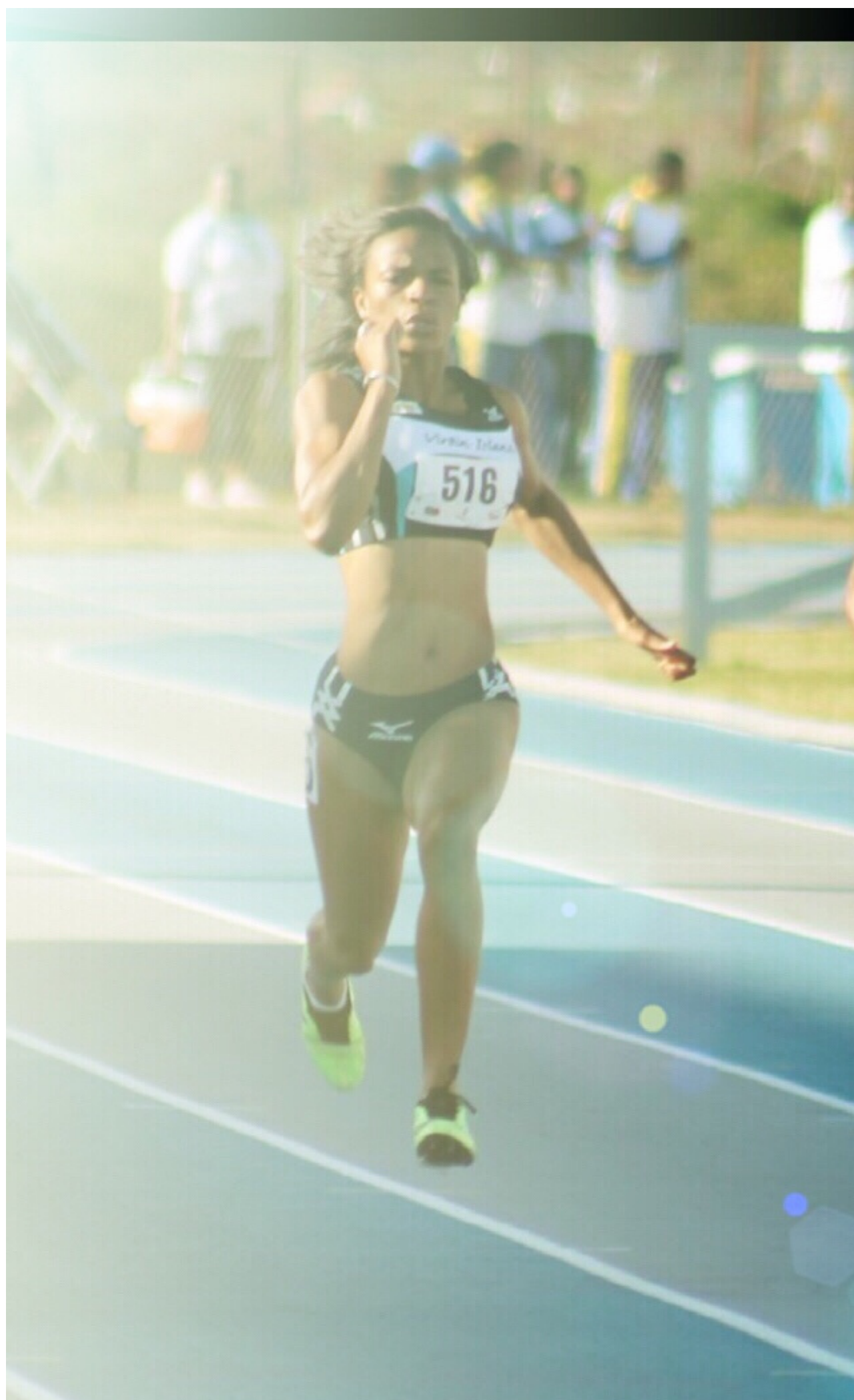
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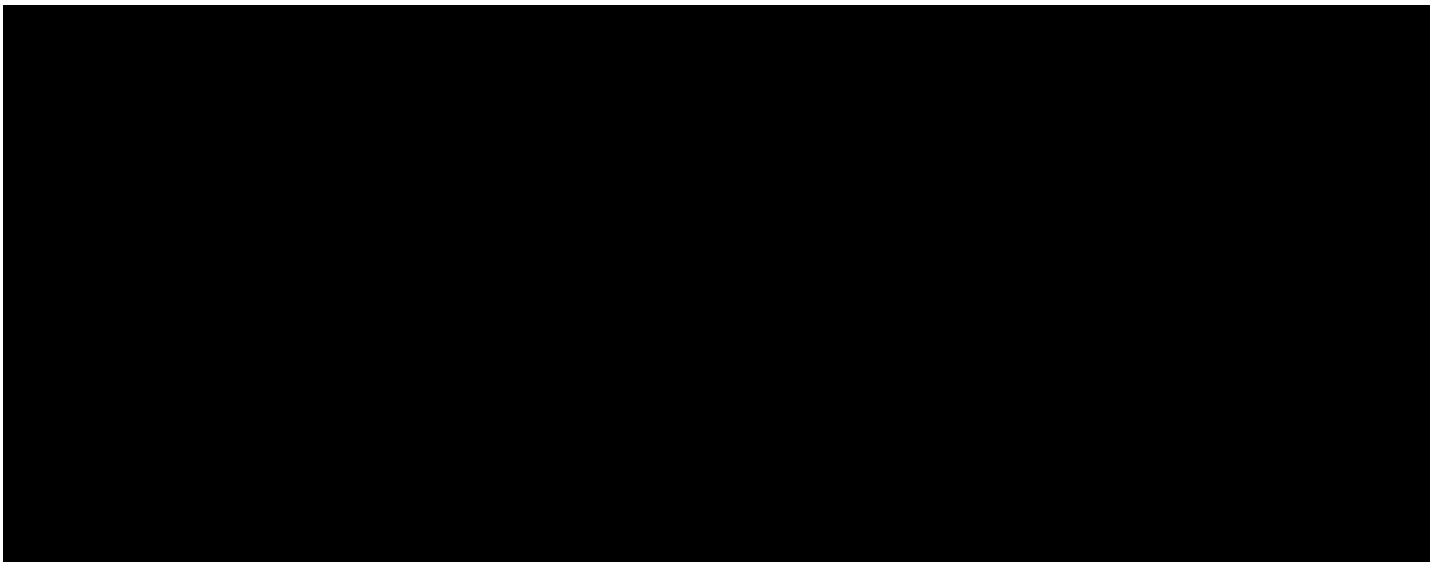
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The 17-year-old St. Croix Educational Complex senior, with urging from Wendell McIntosh and "Saba" Felix, joined the Hounds and Foxes Track Team in the 6th grade and quickly became recognized by many. One year later, she represented the territory's national track and field team at the 2011 CAC Championships in Tortola. Since then, Ms. Jack has participated in the Poly Relays in Puerto Rico and many other local and national track meets -- capturing many titles in the 100m, 200m, and 400m dash. She has also attended the CARIFTA Games for four consecutive years, where she made a name for herself with superb record times.

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Most recently, Ms. Jack traveled to Cali, Colombia in June 2015 to compete in the Pan Am Youth Games, and won a gold medal for the territory while setting a Pan Am Youth record of 11.86 seconds in the 100m.

Ms. Jack told The Consortium on Thursday that their team at Complex practices five days weekly, engage in weight-room training and other rigorous general workout activities. According Ms. Jack, the key to the high school's track and field success -- Complex has been producing track and field athletes for years -- is teamwork. "We cheer on and motivate each other," she said. Yet, the component in the senior's success that appears to be the most indelible, is her mother's dedication and stern hands.

"Nia has made lots of sacrifices. Most children from 6th grade and up are playing and eating whatever they want; but she's made sacrifices not only in her body, but in her diet as well. She's really worked hard and I'm proud that she's able to show her siblings and teammates that hard work does pay off," said Deborah Hodge. "Sometimes I feel bad because I'm tough on her, but today I realize that it's been worth it."

In many ways, Ms. Jack is unlike most teens. Although she counts making time for fun as important, Ms. Jack has been able to keep her eyes on her dream of playing in the Olympics, recognizing that the things considered fun as an adolescent are oftentimes fleeting. It's not a trait attributed to the majority, and Ms. Hodge says part of her daughter's determination on staying focused is the result of a solid spiritual foundation.

"It definitely comes from a spiritual foundation that's been instilled in me, and I try my best to re-instill it in my children," Ms. Hodge said. "If you know where your help and strength comes from, you will be able to get things done."

Ms. Jack will attend Alabama State University, with its [robust women's track and field program](#), while Mr. Griffin will attend the University of Arkansas at Pin Bluff, which boasts an [accomplished men's track and field team](#).