

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Young Virgin Islands Runner Mikaela Smith Gets Closer To Olympic Dream, Qualifies For Track and Field State Championships In Tennessee

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Editor's Note: This article was originally written in *The Tennessean* on May 14. It is based on St. Croix runner Mikaela Smith, who will be competing in the TSSAA track and field state championships on May 24 at MTSU's Dean A. Hayes Stadium in Murfreesboro.

Mikaela Smith made remarkable time, blowing by her competition in her first ever race. Maybe the diaper had been slowing her down this whole time.

Still shy of her third birthday, the future track and field star turned a toddle into a dash as she covered a one-mile parent-assisted course quicker than peers three years her senior.

"At that point we kind of knew something was up because she was beating 5-year-olds," remembered Keith Smith, Mikaela's father and a former Olympic sprinter.

That was hardly the last time an overachieving Mikaela excelled against older or more experienced competition. After spending the past 13 years living in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Mikaela moved to the mainland last fall to run at Station Camp High School for her senior year in an attempt to find more consistent races, earn a college track scholarship and further follow in her parents' footsteps of international competition.

Keith, a native of Trinidad who competed in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, met his wife, Mirielle, on the track. She had run for her native Netherlands. They married, moved to Michigan and had three children before relocating to St. Croix on the tiny island near Puerto Rico.

Last year Mirielle and Mikaela, who will graduate at just 16 because she skipped eighth grade, visited Middle Tennessee where a family friend had moved after years on the island. Now a faculty member at nearby Welch College, Stephen Beck and his family agreed to open their home to Mikaela if she wanted to come.

"I really wanted to move somewhere that I could have competition," said the slender runner, whose speciality is the 800 meters. "I wanted to be able to become better. I want to be the best, but I need to work my way to being the best."

Of course the move came with obstacles. A wild weather year meant too cold temperatures for Mikaela in Tennessee, and much worse for her family back in the Virgin Islands. Hurricanes Irma and Maria tore through the Caribbean in back-to-back weeks, decimating the family's home and leaving them stranded because of fallen trees.

"That was devastating," she said. "For the first couple hours, you don't even know if they're OK. You just had to go on faith. You're not able to help them."

Mikaela's track season hasn't gone quite like she'd hoped either. A hamstring injury at the season's start sidelined her for weeks. She's only run in a handful of meets, though she was able to return for the recent sub-sectionals. She finished second in the 800 in 2:25 – well short of her personal best of 2:17 – but still qualifying for the Section 3-AAA meet.

She followed that with a fourth-place finish at the sectional at Ravenwood on Saturday in 2:20.75 to qualify for the TSSAA track and field state championships on May 24 at MTSU's Dean A. Hayes Stadium in Murfreesboro.

"She's got the genetics, but she's also got the desire," said Bob Frech, Station Camp's assistant track coach who coaches the distance runners. "She's got a real inner drive. She wants to excel and she may be a little tough on herself if she doesn't."

It's because Mikaela has big dreams, Keith said. She's already set to represent the U.S. Virgin Islands at the 2018 Summer Youth Olympic Games in Argentina. Then she'll run for Austin Peay University next year as a 17-year-old freshman with hopes of breaking into the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

"I've been really, really blessed but she's probably going to end up going to more places than me or my wife have been," said Keith, whose son Malique is currently a junior on the Arkansas Pine Bluff track team. "She has a lot of opportunities and that's really what we want for our children. We want them to enjoy the sport and what it has to offer."

Article source: [The Tennessean](#).

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