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A Mindset of Hunger: How Victory at CAC Games Sparked J-Naya Ephraim's Desire For a Career in Basketball

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J-Naya Ephraim

Editor's Note: This is the part of a series of profiles of the athletes on the VI Women's Basketball team, who will be [celebrated this weekend](#) for their gold medal win at the 2023 CAC Games.

The recent historic win by the Virgin Islands Women's Basketball Team has strengthened at least one member's resolve to pursue a professional sporting career. In a recent interview, 23-year-old J-Naya Ephraim proudly explained to Consortium journalists how being a part of this victory reinforced her enthusiasm for the game and her confidence in her capabilities. "My goal right now is to go pro. The experience in El Salvador showed me that I can compete with some of the best!"

Born and raised on the Big Island of St.Croix, J-Naya has fond memories of basketball being an important part of her childhood. She shared that she began playing from as early as 4 or 5 years old. "I grew up with a single mother of 3 kids and she was always working to provide for us," Ephraim recalled. "So I grew up going outside with my brother who taught me everything I know. From playing in the neighbourhood to me pursuing my dreams of playing in college."

Ms. Ephraim is proud of her journey as a player, from her humble beginnings to making headlines. "It means everything to me to be a part of this team. I love my island!!" she exclaimed. She explained to the Consortium that college workouts prevented her from being a part of the national team for several years. According to the star athlete, "to come back 9 years later and play with some of the girls I grew up with and looked up to- Lanese, Anisha, and Kadesha- it was definitely an honor and amazing feeling to win gold beside them! Especially with all odds against us!"

Despite the pressure of playing in such a tournament, J-Naya was able to remain focused because of what she describes as a "mindset of hunger." As she puts it, "For me personally, I had my future to think about. It was always a dream to play pro. I just graduated from college and I know I didn't perform how I knew I could deep down, so playing in such a high tournament and getting to represent my country, I was extremely hungry to prove that I belong."

Knowing the work she put in both physically and mentally, J-Naya remained confident in her abilities, a factor which she believes is the most important ingredient for success. She was further reassured by the talent and experience of her teammates, making it easy to follow and rally behind the leaders of the team.

As it relates to the significance of their eventual victory, she says it's proof that anything is possible. "We were hungry and believed in each other," she shared. "Regardless if we didn't have weeks/months to prepare together, we fought and played our game knowing it was bigger than us." Her hope is that this win will demonstrate the immense potential of women's basketball in the Virgin Islands and how serious the territory's athletes are.

While J-Naya and her teammates can now serve as inspiration for many young athletes, she hopes to someday contribute further by becoming a personal trainer and passing on what she's learned to the younger generations. A recent graduate of the University of George Mason in Fairfax, VA, Ms. Ephraim holds a degree in social justice and human rights. Off the court, she enjoys shopping, reading, listening to music and spending time with loved ones.

Her loved ones, especially her family, are her biggest source of motivation. "They believed in me in times where I lacked the motivation and confidence," she divulged, adding, "I'm really big on family because in the end they're all I have and I know they're with me every step of the way."

When it comes to developing and maintaining the winning mindset which brought her and her teammates to victory, Ms. Ephraim's advice is to just keep going and be reminded that everyone's timing is different. "I never won in my career until now," the young sportswoman shared. "My work ethic never changed. Yes, sometimes I got down but I never gave up. Hard work does pay off! If I can do it, so can you. You have to believe in yourself even when others don't. As long as you believe it, you can manifest it and grab it!"